

THE 3 INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE OPERA SINGER'S SPIRIT





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
OPERA SINGER'S SPIRIT**

An elderly lady inherits a villa from a deceased opera singer but she is not willing to move into it because she senses that it is haunted. Her best friend gives The Three Investigators an unusual assignment to prove that there is no ghost there. Just to satisfy the client, Jupiter stages a séance, but contrary to expectations, the dead singer actually responds, telling them the nature of her death. Suddenly Jupiter, Pete and Bob investigate on behalf of a ghost and uncovers a dangerous game of intrigue and betrayal.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Opera Singer's Spirit

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*Based on characters created by
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(The Three ???: The Villa of the Dead)

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1. In Blistering Heat

The skull stared at Jupiter Jones from empty eye sockets. Its pale grin seemed to mock him. Jupiter reached out for the head. When he lifted it up, the lower jaw folded down and turned the grin into a demonic laugh. Jupiter blew the dust off the skull bone and frowned at the dead face.

“*To be or not to be, that is the question.*”

“Oh man, Jupe, we’ll never finish this way!” Pete complained behind him. The second member of the detective trio was busy checking an old typewriter for its functionality.

The Three Investigators had decided to clean out their headquarters, which was soon bursting at the seams with all the junk. Headquarters was an old mobile home trailer that stood on the premises of The Jones Salvage Yard, owned and operated by Jupiter’s uncle Titus and aunt Mathilda.

With all the junk that had accumulated over the years, they wanted to earn a few dollars from Uncle Titus. Now they sat in the dark, dusty chaos between boxes and cartons and inspected their treasures. But the more they rummaged, the slower they progressed. For with every object they brought to light, there was extensive discussion about whether it was junk or a valuable memento.

And Jupiter did not miss the opportunity to comment on everything with his own, high-minded style—which got on Pete’s nerves. “With all you find, if you recite Shakespeare for half an hour, we won’t be done until next year.”

Jupiter did not turn his gaze away from the skull and continued with a theatrical voice: “*Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer... The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune... Or to take arms against a sea of troubles... And by opposing end them?*” And by the way, Pete, that’s from Hamlet, to be exact.”

Bob Andrews, who had previously ignored the banter of his friends because he was busy cleaning old picture frames, now turned around. “Socrates!”

“What now?” Pete asked. “Shakespeare, Hamlet or Socrates?”

“Not the quote, Pete. I mean the skull! That is Socrates, the talking skull given to us by The Great Gulliver! Oh, my gosh, I forgot about that one, Jupe. You can’t possibly sell that, it has to stay at Headquarters!”

“I couldn’t agree more, Bob. Socrates is coming to a Three Investigators Museum later today.” He started giggling. “Remember how Aunt Mathilda almost had a heart attack when Socrates said ‘boo’ to her?”

Bob laughed too. “That was hilarious!”

“Speaking of Aunt Mathilda,” Pete said as he looked out the window in concern. “She’s coming here right now. Fellas, I have a bad feeling.”

A few moments later, there was an energetic knock on the door.

“Come in,” said Jupiter.

Mathilda Jones entered the headquarters of The Three Investigators and looked angrily from Bob to Pete to Jupiter—to Socrates.

“Boo!” Jupiter went and opened the lower jaw of the skull.

His aunt uttered a short scream and flinched back. "Jupiter Jones! How dare you frighten your poor aunt like that! Especially when you really have more urgent things to do! What's wrong with you? Why aren't you at work yet?"

"What kind of work?" Jupiter asked astounded and put Socrates on his desk.

"What work? I told you to repaint our office building."

"Today?"

"Yes, of course today. What do you think I've been talking about all week?"

"You spoke of Sunday. I thought you meant next Sunday."

"Not at all, Jupiter Jones, I meant this Sunday. Come on, guys, I really need your help. If we don't get it done this weekend, it's gonna be months again."

"Must we?" moaned Pete.

"Yes," Mathilda Jones said for sure. "You must."

The roof of the office building was completely filthy. Dried leaves and the dust of many years had mixed with rainwater and had solidified by the burning sun to a grey-brown crust, which could hardly be scraped out by a steel brush.

Pete crawled on all fours over the layer of dirt and scrubbed sometimes here, sometimes there, but always with the same result—the dirt just wouldn't come off. And without a clean surface, they could not proceed to paint. Frustrated, he knelt down, shielded his eyes from the sun and looked over to Headquarters. It was as dirty as the roof Pete was crawling on. Nevertheless, he or his friends would never in their lives have thought of giving the trailer a new coat of paint.

Why was it so important to Aunt Mathilda that the office shone in new splendour?

"Get on with it up there!" cried Jupiter from below, imitating Aunt Mathilda's voice. "I can't hear you scrubbing anymore!"

"How about we trade places, Jupe?" Pete yelled back. "The filth doesn't even think about leaving. I bet it's stuck on something. All the smog from Los Angeles for the last two years is on this roof!"

"You think it looks better down here?" Bob interjected.

"Boys, if you keep whining about your hard times instead of working, you'll never finish!"

Pete turned around. Mathilda Jones had appeared behind them. An amused smile lay on her face. In her hands, she carried a tray with three huge glasses of orange juice and a filled carafe. She placed it on a worn chair nearby. "I don't want my hard-working workmen to die of thirst."

"And what about the cherry pie?" Jupiter asked hopefully, although he had had breakfast only two hours ago.

"You'll get it when you're done, as a reward."

"Fellas, I think we should shift up a couple of gears!" Jupiter dipped his steel sponge into the water and started again.

Bob and Pete also continued scrubbing away. They knew that the sooner they finished, the sooner they could get back to other things.

The sun rose higher and higher in the bright blue, cloudless sky and Pete had sweat on his forehead. The orange juice had long since been drunk and the Second Investigator only dreamed of going to the beach after work and jumping into the freezing cold waters of the Pacific Ocean. Bob, on the other hand, wanted nothing more than to sit under a parasol on the beach promenade with a huge ice cream sundae and watch people stroll by. And Jupiter gave

himself over completely to the thought of dropping into the shade after the last brush and polishing off the entire cherry pie by himself.

The day was endless, the heat unbearable. But finally, in the late afternoon, the wooden office shone in blinding white. Pete looked at the finished work from a reasonable distance, then he looked down on himself. His former white T-shirt was nothing more than a grey-brown, sweaty rag.

He looked over to Bob and Jupiter. Bob didn't look any better, but Jupiter had been especially pleased with the work. His face was bright red and wet, the T-shirt was dripping and he could hardly stand upright.

Mathilda Jones approached the three boys and clapped her hands enthusiastically. "Bravo! The office looks wonderful! I guarantee you, this will boost next month's sales. You've really earned your reward! Come out on the verandah. It's all set up!"

Jupiter turned around and looked at his aunt with dark rimmed eyes. "Aunt Mathilda?" "Yeah?"

"This is the last time you get away with a cherry pie for a job like this. I am completely finished."

She looked at him guiltily. "You mean I can't make it up to you with a cherry pie?"

The First Investigator shook his head silently. "Not even with two."

"Okay, I owe you one. If you need my help in the future, you can count on me. I promise."

"I'll remember that."

A little later, The Three Investigators sat in the shade of the verandah and greedily devoured the delicious pie while the sweat dried on their bodies.

"I tell you, I won't do that again so soon," moaned Bob as he picked up the last crumbs from his plate.

"Don't worry, a new coat of paint is not due for another two years," Jupiter said. "At least now we have a favour to ask of Aunt Mathilda. Who knows what it's good for?"

Something was ringing far away. Pete pricked up his ears. "Isn't that our phone ringing?"

"Yes," said Jupiter. "Go for it."

"Nothing doing," Pete objected. "You're the First Investigator."

Jupiter wrestled with himself for a moment, but as so often, his curiosity ended up being a little bigger than his laziness, so he got out of his garden chair, jumped off the verandah and ran across the dusty salvage yard over to the trailer. He made it to the phone just in time.

"The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking."

"Oh, I've got the right man on the line right away," cried an elderly woman's voice excitedly. "My name is Bernadette O'Donnell... and I wanted to speak to one of you... Jupiter Jones—you are the leader of your company, right?"

"That's right. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I'm from Malibu Beach and I've heard and read a lot about you guys. They say you specialize in supernatural phenomena."

Jupiter cleared his throat embarrassed. "Speciality might be a bit much to say, but you are right in that we have solved several cases involving alleged ghostly and spooky phenomena."

"Perfect!" Miss O'Donnell cried with delight. "Then you are exactly the right people for me! I have a job for you!"

"How nice! What is it about?"

"It's about my friend Eloise Adams's house."

“And what about this house?”

Bernadette O'Donnell laughed softly. “It's not haunted.”

“Excuse me?”

“I know it sounds crazy, but Eloise's house isn't haunted.”

Jupiter was confused. “This is... wonderful... isn't it?”

“Yes,” Miss O'Donnell confirmed. “This is actually quite excellent. The problem is, we need proof.”

2. Visit to a Fairytale Castle

“Fellas, off to the shower, we have an appointment!”

“Excuse me?” Pete asked.

“A new case. A client just called. I promised her we’d come by in an hour.” Jupiter described to his friends in short sentences what it was all about.

“A haunted house?” Pete remarked. “Oh man, can’t it be something else?”

“It’s something else. It’s not a haunted house. I confess, I didn’t quite understand the whole thing, but we’ll find out the details soon. But first we have to change. So come on, you can shower in our house. We don’t have any time to lose!”

Pete shook his head. “It’s always amazing how quickly you regain your energy as soon as there is a new case.”

Since Bob and Pete always had some fresh clothes stored at Headquarters, they didn’t have to go home first. Half an hour later, they were all freshly showered, changed and felt like newborns.

Malibu was an affluent area, many Hollywood stars and rich businessmen lived here. As it was only a short distance from Rocky Beach, The Three Investigators could easily cycle there. The sun was already low in the sky as they rode north along the coastal roads and passed the first houses in town.

The address Miss O’Donnell had given the First Investigator was in a quiet villa area a little way inland. It was a dream house surrounded by a magnificent garden with whitewashed walls that glowed a reddish hue in the setting sun. Hundreds of blood-red roses glowed in the garden. They turned the pergola at the garden gate into a colourful tunnel through which hardly a ray of light penetrated. The roses climbed the short staircase to the front door and reached as far as the balcony, which virtually exploded with blossoms. It was like being in a fairytale castle.

“It’s like Sleeping Beauty here,” Bob said, impressed, as they parked the bikes by the road.

“Yes, only this time the prince is a mover,” Jupiter answered and pointed to the truck of a moving company parked at the side of the road. The cargo area had been almost emptied, only a few boxes were still there. Two men in dirty white overalls picked up the last boxes and carried them into the house.

“Wonderful!” the voice Jupiter knew from the phone came from the house. “Send me the bill!”

“That should be Miss O’Donnell!” Jupiter said.

The movers got into their truck and drove away.

The Three Investigators entered the garden and climbed the rose-lined stairs to the open door. In the adjacent entrance hall, an elderly lady was bending over a box and rummaging around in it. She was wearing jeans and a T-shirt, her grey hair tied back with a colourful scarf. When she noticed The Three Investigators, she straightened up and came towards them, looking very pleased.

“Oh, there you are already! That was quick. I’m Bernadette O’Donnell.” She extended her hand to each of the three.

“Jupiter Jones. And these are my colleagues, Bob Andrews and Pete Crenshaw.”

“Pleased to meet you. Sorry about the mess, we’re just moving in.”

“No problem,” Pete said magnanimously.

“The living room is already ready!” Miss O’Donnell said. “You can go in there.” Then she turned and called out: “Cecilia! The detectives are here!”

She opened a double door on the left side of the entrance hall and told The Three Investigators to follow her.

The living room was furnished with heavy carpets and antique furniture and overlooked the garden. Old oil paintings in golden frames hung on the walls, a curved sofa made of red velvet stood next to the fireplace, and next to it was a brass tea table. The only thing that disturbed the fairytale castle atmosphere was the huge and sinfully expensive music system that stood against the wall and shone in matt silver. Music must mean a lot to whoever stayed here.

Sitting on the sofa was a woman about Miss O’Donnell’s age. She was dressed all in nondescript black and wore rimless glasses. With her hair combed back severely, she looked like a draconian headmistress. With an expressionless face, she looked at The Three Investigators. Miss O’Donnell introduced them to the lady. “And this is my friend Cecilia Jennings. Dr Cecilia Jennings. Please take your seats.”

Jupiter, Bob and Pete took their seats and Bernadette O’Donnell poured them tea.

“I must confess, Miss O’Donnell, that I didn’t understand everything on the phone earlier. Perhaps we should start again from the beginning. What did you say it was about? A haunted house?”

“Yes... and no,” Miss O’Donnell said. “It’s about this house... but I don’t think it’s haunted.”

“What about you?” Jupiter turned to Cecilia Jennings.

“No. I am a doctor, a scientist. I don’t believe in that.”

“Well, then I don’t quite understand,” Juve said.

“It’s our mutual friend Eloise who believes in ghosts,” Miss O’Donnell enlightened him. “She is the rightful owner of the house... but I’d better start at the beginning... Until three months ago, this was Dora Mastrantonio’s villa...”

“Dora Mastrantonio?” Bob blurted out. “You mean the famous opera singer?”

Miss O’Donnell smiled. “That’s the one. I’m glad to see that even young people can recognize her name.”

“Well, I’m not really an opera fan,” Bob confessed. “But Dora Mastrantonio is simply a star! Didn’t she pass away recently?”

She nodded sadly. “Dora, Eloise, Cecilia and I were best friends for decades. A long time ago, we promised each other—if we outlive our husbands, we’ll all move into a house and live together. Well, I myself have never been married. Dora became a widow fifteen years ago, Eloise seven years ago... and Cecilia’s husband Gilbert died four months ago.”

Dr Jennings lowered her eyes. Now it was clear to Jupiter why she was dressed all in black and seemed so absent. “I’m sorry about that,” he said sheepishly. Dr Jennings did not respond.

“Poor Dora died a week later,” Miss O’Donnell continued. Her previously firm voice became brittle and she pulled out a handkerchief to dab away a single tear. “She’s had a fatal accident. Poor thing! And we had imagined everything so beautifully. The four of us, together in this house. It would have been wonderful! Well, now it’s just the three of us.”

Jupiter glanced unobtrusively over at Pete and Bob. No one knew anything to say. There was an awkward pause.

But then Miss O'Donnell straightened up again, ran a hand through her hair and smiled. "But life's too short to mope about, isn't it? Eloise inherited this house from Dora. Of all of us, she was the closest to her. And so we decided to put our plan into action in spite of everything. There are only three of us now, but through this house and the garden that Dora loved so much, she will always be with us."

"The only problem," Dr Jennings now took the floor, "is that Eloise doesn't want to."

"What doesn't she want?" asked Bob.

"... Move in here. She inherited the house, it's legally hers now, but she doesn't want to live here."

"Because she thinks it's haunted," Jupiter guessed.

"Correct," Dr Jennings confirmed. "And that, of course, is nonsense."

"Without knowing the situation in detail, I agree with you," Jupe said.

"You see, Cecilia, I told you... The Three Investigators are just right for us. You don't believe in ghosts, do you?"

Jupiter shook his head. "We have often had to deal with mysterious occurrences that at first glance seemed to be of supernatural origin. But in retrospect, everything always turned out to be a hoax."

"Great!" Miss O'Donnell was delighted. "Then I hope you will take the case?"

Jupiter looked over at Bob and Pete, who nodded in agreement.

"With the greatest pleasure, ma'am."

Footsteps sounded in the corridor. Then came an uncertain, bright voice: "Hello?"

"Oh, that's her!" murmured Miss O'Donnell. "Cecilia, be nice to her! And from you three, I expect full support!"

The Three Investigators looked at each other, puzzled. They had not the faintest idea what Bernadette O'Donnell was talking about. But no one had the chance to ask any more questions, because the door to the living room opened and a stout lady with chestnut-tinted hair entered. She was about Miss O'Donnell's and Dr Jennings's age and wore a loose-fitting robe in warm autumn colours, with a thick, heavy necklace of coloured wooden beads.

The lady's face was lined with worry lines, her bright blue eyes glanced uncertainly from one to the other. "What's going on here?"

"Ah, good of you to come, Eloise!" exclaimed Miss O'Donnell. "Would you like a cup of tea? It's very fresh!"

"What are you doing here? What are all these boxes doing in the hall?"

"Oh, these are... uh..." Miss O'Donnell began.

"Our moving boxes," Dr Jennings said tersely.

Eloise's eyes widened in shock. "You don't really want to move in here?"

"We've already moved in here, my dear," Dr Jennings replied. "I know it's your house, but sooner or later you'll change your mind anyway and make your home here."

"And so we thought we'd make it a little easier for you and get everything ready!" exclaimed Miss O'Donnell, nodding encouragingly at Eloise. "Didn't we, Cecilia?"

"That's right," Cecilia said. "Because the fact that we will live here together has been agreed for years."

Eloise was still standing motionless in the middle of the room. "And who are these three young gentlemen?" she finally said.

"They, oh, they are..."

"We are The Three Investigators," Jupiter took the floor. "May I give you our card?"

Jupiter pulled a small silver card holder from the inside pocket of his jacket, which he had found in the salvage yard a few days ago and immediately used it to put his business cards. He flipped it open and handed Miss O'Donnell a card. It said:



"I am Eloise Adams," the lady replied mechanically. "I don't quite understand... Investigators? What is all this about?"

"Sit down first, Eloise," Bernadette said with a smile, sliding a little to one side on the sofa. "You look very pale."

Slowly, Mrs Adams walked towards the couch and took a seat.

"Now will you please explain to me what is going on?" Eloise asked.

"Listen, Eloise," Miss O'Donnell began. "Jupiter, Pete and Bob are very special investigators. They know about ghosts and spirits. We hired them to take away your fear of this house."

"Excuse me?" croaked Mrs Adams, now looking from one to the other. "But that—"

"It's for your own good!" assured Dr Jennings. "We want you to feel at home here soon!"

Slowly, Mrs Adams's helplessness turned to anger. "Can I say something now? First you move in here without my knowledge and now there are investigators snooping around my house."

She turned to The Three Investigators and said: "I don't want to seem rude, but you can leave right now!"

3. Three Ladies and a Ghost

“We are sorry, ma’am,” Jupiter assured. “We had no idea that you were not informed about our visit.”

“It’s not your fault,” Mrs Adams said gently. Her anger had dissipated as quickly as it had flared up. “But it’s all too much for me at the moment.”

“But Eloise,” Miss O’Donnell said, putting a hand on her knee reassuringly. “Now listen to our idea first. These three boys can really help us, believe me!”

“But I don’t need any help!”

“Of course you need help, otherwise you would have packed your things long ago and moved here—to this beautiful house with its beautiful garden, which you always envied Dora for. It’s yours now! You don’t really want to give it up and continue living in your little apartment in the new building district!”

“You don’t understand. Of course I love this house, and Dora loved it too—more than anything in the world. But she died in such a terrible way... Her spirit will never leave these walls!” Eloise Adams seemed desperate.

“And that’s exactly why The Three Investigators are here,” Miss O’Donnell said calmly. “They’re going to prove to you that it’s all just your imagination.” She gave Jupiter an imploring look. “Isn’t it?”

The First Investigator cleared his throat. He did not feel well at all. “We will do our utmost, but it would be helpful if you could tell us what exactly you observed, Mrs Adams. What were the hauntings? Were there noises? Or did you see something?”

“Well, none of it!” exclaimed Cecilia Jennings. “That’s the joke of it!”

“I don’t quite understand,” Jupiter said.

“Eloise didn’t see anything,” Cecilia Jennings explained. “She didn’t hear anything either. She just thinks the place is haunted!”

“Is that right, Mrs Adams?”

Eloise Adams nodded. “I have not seen a ghost. Since Dora’s death, I’ve hardly been here, only just to water the flowers and look after things. But I won’t want to spend even one night in this house... Dora’s spirit is moving around here... I can just feel it!”

“Then I don’t quite understand what we are supposed to do,” Pete said. “If you haven’t seen or heard anything, what are we supposed to investigate?”

“Nothing at all, if you ask me,” Mrs Adams replied defiantly. “I don’t need any investigation. I know what I know.”

“But after all, we put The Three Investigators on this case,” Miss O’Donnell said. “I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

“Off-hand, I don’t even have an idea how to prove the non-existence of a ghost,” Jupiter said. “As far as I am concerned, there are no ghosts.”

“Perhaps Mrs Adams would have to prove the existence of ghosts to justify her claims,” Bob suggested.

“I’m not going to prove anything!” Mrs Adams cried.

“No, no, no,” Miss O’Donnell interjected. “That’s not the way to do it. We have to work on this together, all of us.”

“And what do you suggest?” Pete wanted to know.

“It’s very simple... We try to call the spirit. If it doesn’t answer, then it doesn’t exist.”

“It’s not that simple, Bernadette,” Mrs Adams said. “To a bunch of unbelievers like you, Dora’s spirit will never come. That kind of thing only works with a medium.”

“A medium?” asked Pete.

“Yes,” Mrs Adams said. “A person who can make contact with the spirit world... during a séance. There are people who have this gift.”

“Do you know any?” Pete asked.

“I’m afraid not.”

“Fantastic!” exclaimed Miss O’Donnell. “Then it will be your job to find a medium and prepare the séance. That shouldn’t be difficult for experienced detectives like you, should it?”

“Well...” Jupiter began. But Bernadette O’Donnell did not let him finish at all.

“Great! Oh, this is going to be exciting. Who knows, Cecilia, maybe Eloise will be right after all and Dora’s ghost really will answer. When will you be ready?”

Bob looked at Pete. Pete looked at Bob. They both looked at Juve. How were they going to get out of this mess?

“Tomorrow,” Jupiter replied resolutely.

“Tomorrow?” echoed Pete. He barely managed to hide his horror.

The First Investigator nodded. “Tomorrow evening.”

“But...” Pete lowered his voice to a murmur. “But we don’t know any medium.”

“Yes, Pete, I do. The lady is very gifted and has often spoken to the dead.”

Eloise Adams frowned. “But my two friends here don’t believe in ghosts.”

“Neither do I, but that’s not what this is about,” Juve said. “The medium I have in mind claims to be in touch with the afterlife. If that is the truth, then she will be able to summon Dora’s spirit. As such, I am more than willing to give it a go.”

“Fine!” exclaimed Miss O’Donnell. “That’s settled then!”

“We’ll meet here tomorrow evening after sunset,” Jupiter suggested. “And then we will see whether this house is haunted or not. But now if you’ll excuse us, we have some preparations to make.”

“Of course! See you tomorrow!” Miss O’Donnell walked The Three Investigators to the door and they hurried to get on their bikes and leave.

“Are you out of your senses?” Pete asked angrily as they turned the first street corner. It was already dark and the moon was just rising. “You actually want to hire a medium? What has got into you?”

“What has got into me? These three ladies have got into me!” Jupiter’s expression darkened. “We are supposed to prove that there are no ghosts... as if we have nothing better to do!”

“Hey Juve, I’ve never seen you like this,” Bob said as they turned onto the main road towards Rocky Beach. “You’re always on fire when it comes to ghost stories and apparitions.”

“Yes, with hauntings! And with ghostly apparitions that you can see!” Juve said. “But here, the case is completely different. Mrs Adams is a superstitious lady who is afraid to move into her new house. Her two friends, however, are desperate to live there and must now convert Eloise. But I’m sorry, fellas, in my eyes, this is a scheming game and not the job of a detective! There is nothing to investigate at all. I know there are no ghosts, and I don’t have to prove that!”

The Second Investigator rolled over next to Jupiter and shook his head. "But then why did you accept the offer?"

"Quite simply—to end this situation as quickly as possible. The three ladies want a show delivered, a séance with a medium and all the trimmings, then let them have it. The show will be absolutely convincing and still end completely inconclusively, proving that Mrs Adams's house is not haunted. What they do with this knowledge is their problem. For us, we can close the case and go back to other things."

For a moment, Pete was speechless. "You want to fool them!"

"No. I just give them what they want. In the end, we will have very satisfied clients. Count on it!"

Slowly Pete began to like the idea. "And how do we do this whole thing?"

"The most important thing is the medium," Jupe said. "It has to be a convincing performance!"

"I'm curious about that, Jupe," said Bob. "Do you already have someone in mind to play the part?"

"Yes, I do. And I wasn't fibbing about one thing. The lady has indeed spoken to a dead man before... just this very day... to be precise, with a skull."

Bob's eyes widened. "You don't mean..."

The First Investigator laughed uproariously. He pedalled faster and chased towards the buildings of Rocky Beach that had appeared against the Pacific glittering in the moonlight. "This is going to be a lot of fun!"

4. Aunt Mathilda's Promise

"You want me to what?" Mathilda Jones took a step back and stared at her nephew in horror. Bob and Pete could barely hold back a giggle.

"It's really no big deal, Aunt Mathilda. All you have to do is dress up a bit and pretend you're a medium, nothing more."

Jupiter looked at her innocently. The Three Investigators and Aunt Mathilda were standing in the Jones family kitchen, where Uncle Titus was preparing dinner.

"Nothing else is good. You don't seriously think I'll do it, Jupiter Jones! No, absolutely not." She broke free from her bewilderment and helped Uncle Titus set the table.

"But we are dependent on your help, Aunt Mathilda," Jupiter said urgently. "I have to find someone to conduct a small séance tomorrow evening."

"What have I got to do with it?" Aunt Mathilda said.

"I promised them!" Jupiter exclaimed.

"Then in future you should only make promises that you can keep," Mathilda said. This was exactly what Jupiter had been waiting for. Aunt Mathilda had fallen into his trap. She just didn't know it yet.

"Like you?" Jupe continued.

Aunt Mathilda smiled contentedly. "Yes, just like me. Take your old aunt as an example. I would never think of making such an absurd promise. I only give my word when I'm absolutely sure."

"Fine," Jupiter said. "Then may I remind you that you still owe us something? This afternoon, you promised to support us as thanks for the notorious scrub and paint job whenever we next need your help."

Mathilda Jones, who was about to put the cheese plate on the table, stopped in mid-motion. For a moment, it looked as if she would drop the plate. "No, Jupe. You can't ask me to do that."

Jupiter remained quite calm. "You gave us your word."

"Titus! Why don't you say something?"

Uncle Titus had successfully hidden his grin behind his thick black moustache until now, but now a soft giggle escaped him. "What do you want me to say, Mathilda? If you promised Jupe something, then you have to keep it. You want to be a role model for him, don't you?"

"But I can't..." Mathilda moaned.

"Please, Mrs Jones," Bob now joined in the conversation. "You don't have to do much at all, really! You hardly have to say anything either, we'll do that. The less you say, the more mysterious it looks."

"Yes!" agreed Pete. "You really are perfect for this role!"

Aunt Mathilda turned around indignantly. "What are you trying to say?"

"I... uh..." Pete stammered.

"Are you saying that I look like one of those crazy esoteric women?"

"No! No, I just mean..." Pete began.

"Pete was just saying that you are a gifted, versatile woman with many faces who can surround herself with an aura of the mystical at the drop of a hat," Jupiter said. And he could

have bet that Aunt Mathilda blushed a little.

“Really?”

Uncle Titus laughed. “Of course! That’s why I married you!”

For a moment, she looked indecisively from one to the other. Finally, she dropped into a chair with a sigh. “All right. You win.”

“Thank you, Aunt Mathilda!” Jupiter exclaimed and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

“But don’t let it occur to you that I’m going to do this more often now! A one-time ghost conjuring more than makes up for my guilt!”

“Of course, Mrs Jones,” Bob promised. “And if you ever need anything painted again—”

“Then we can always talk about the conditions,” Pete quickly interrupted him.

Aunt Mathilda grinned. “Have dinner with us and tell me your plan!”

It was always an impressive sight when the black Rolls-Royce with the flashing gold trimmings rolled into The Jones Salvage Yard.

Jupiter had once won a competition organized by the Rent-’n-Ride Auto Agency, which gave him the services of a Rolls-Royce and a chauffeur. Initially, this had been limited to thirty days, but a grateful client had ensured that The Three Investigators could use the Rolls-Royce at any time they wished.

In the meantime, the chauffeur, Worthington had become a good friend of The Three Investigators. Nevertheless, he had never discarded his polite manners, which he had mastered perfectly. And so he did not make a face today when he got out of the car, took off his cap and caught sight of Aunt Mathilda, garishly made up and with her hair up. She was holding a flat briefcase in her hand.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.”

“Good evening, Worthington,” Jupiter said. “I’m glad you have time for us.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

“You’ll have to excuse me, Mr Worthington, but my nephew and his friends persuaded me to appear like this today. I don’t want you to think I’m walking around like this on my own free will.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

Worthington opened the passenger door and let Aunt Mathilda get in, The Three Investigators took the back seats. “Where can I chauffeur you?”

“To Malibu Beach, Worthington.”

“Very well, gentlemen.”

Worthington started the engine, which whirred smoothly, and drove out of the salvage yard.

It was already early evening, but today the sun had hidden behind thick, leaden grey clouds. It had been unbearably hot and humid all day. Then, in the afternoon, the first clouds had appeared, now condensing into a gloomy wall. Wind came up, bringing with it air that smelled like a thunderstorm.

“Fantastic,” Jupiter enthused. “The weather makes the atmosphere we need perfectly. It’s going to be interesting!”

“Well, the main thing is that you’re having fun,” said Aunt Mathilda.

“You’ll manage, Aunt Mathilda. Just do everything as we discussed, then nothing can go wrong.”

The drive didn’t take long, but all the while Aunt Mathilda kept muttering a word to herself that sounded like ‘wija’.

When the Rolls Royce came to a stop in front of Dora Mastrantonio's estate after a few minutes, it was just starting to rain. Worthington got out, opened the doors and conjured up an umbrella out of nowhere. He held it protectively over Aunt Mathilda and The Three Investigators as he escorted them to the entrance of the villa.

"This is a dream!" Aunt Mathilda gushed as she entered the garden and was greeted by a sea of roses.

They were met at the front door by Bernadette O'Donnell, who stared alternately at Aunt Mathilda, Worthington and the Rolls-Royce. The carefully planned entrance did not fail to have its effect. Miss O'Donnell seemed deeply impressed.

"Miss O'Donnell, this is Mathilda, the medium," Jupiter introduced his aunt with a deadly serious face.

Aunt Mathilda bowed her head unctuously, clutching her briefcase tightly.

"Shall I wait for you, gentlemen?" asked Worthington.

"Thank you, Worthington, that would be nice. I think you can come back in an hour."

Worthington was about to turn back when Miss O'Donnell called out: "Come in, come in! It's more comfortable there than in your car! I mean... not that your car is uncomfortable, not at all!" Miss O'Donnell laughed uncertainly, which Jupiter registered with great satisfaction.

Miss O'Donnell led everyone into the living room where Dr Jennings and Mrs Adams were already sitting. They introduced each other. There were candles everywhere, bathing the room in a warm, dim light. The lamps were switched off.

"We thought it would make it a bit more atmospheric," Miss O'Donnell explained, looking uncertainly at Aunt Mathilda. "Only if it's okay with you, of course. We can also switch on the electric lights."

Aunt Mathilda nodded again. "It's fine the way it is."

Now Eloise Adams approached Aunt Mathilda. "And you are really a medium?"

"Yes, that's me," Aunt Mathilda replied, coughing.

"Have you made contact with many spirits?"

She nodded barely perceptibly.

"And do you think there is a ghost in this house?"

"We'll know soon."

"Well, let's just get started then!" suggested Miss O'Donnell, rubbing her hands together. "Tell us what you need!"

"A round table. I brought the rest with me."

"The best thing is to take the table from the dining room," Cecilia Jennings suggested and told The Three Investigators to follow her. Together they carried in a large table made of dark wood and placed it in the middle of the room.

Aunt Mathilda looked at it approvingly. "Yes, that will do."

She put down her briefcase and opened it. Inside was a large wooden board covered with signs and symbols. The numbers 0 to 9 and the letters from A to Z were burnt into the wood in a large circle; the circle was interrupted in two places by the words 'Yes' and 'No'; and the edge of the board was adorned with pentagrams and other magical symbols.

"This," said Aunt Mathilda, trying to sound as mystical as possible, "is a Ouija board."

Jupiter noticed her relief at having pronounced the difficult word correctly.

"With its help, we will call the spirit." Aunt Mathilda put the board in the middle of the table and then took out a wine glass. "And now please sit down," she instructed.

Everyone present took a seat. Only Worthington remained standing stiffly near the door.

"Don't you want to join us, Worthington?" suggested Jupiter.

“If the ladies and gentlemen do not mind, I prefer not to attend this event.”

“As you wish,” Jupe said.

While distant thunder rumbled outside, Aunt Mathilda sat upright and let her gaze wander slowly around the circle. There was an excited tension in everyone’s face. Even Jupiter, Pete and Bob, who knew exactly what was going on, were caught up in the atmosphere.

Then Aunt Mathilda said in a smoky voice: “Let’s begin!”

5. Séance

“I ask you to concentrate. Try to forget about your everyday life and to get totally involved in the here and now. Disturbing thoughts could drive the mind away.”

Aunt Mathilda reached for the wine glass and breathed into it. Then she let her right hand circle over the glass and finally placed it in the middle of the board with the base pointing upwards.

“Now all of you place the index finger of your right hand on the rim of the glass. I will call the spirit. If there is one in this house, the glass will move. If not, then this house is pure. Please be patient. It may take a few minutes. However, if we have not received an answer after ten minutes, my work is done.”

Everyone put their finger on the glass. A lightning flashed from the sky and bathed the room in bluish light for a split second. Aunt Mathilda waited for the thunder, then took a deep breath, closed her eyes and said: “I ask for contact with the realm of the dead. If the poor soul of a deceased has sought refuge within these walls, please answer us! Spirit, are you there?”

Dead silence fell over those present. No one moved, there was no clearing of throats, no loud breathing. Only the ticking of the big grandfather clock in the corner and the rustling of the wind outside the window could be heard.

Jupiter let his gaze wander over the faces illuminated by the flickering candlelight. Aunt Mathilda had closed her eyes devotedly and was swaying her upper body slightly back and forth. It was a perfect performance! Jupiter was impressed. He hadn't thought his aunt had so much talent. She was completely absorbed in her role.

Bob and Pete focussed on the middle of the table and tried not to let anything show. They avoided eye contact, otherwise one of them would probably have laughed.

Miss O'Donnell had closed her eyes, which surprised Jupiter a little. After all, she was the one who didn't believe in ghosts. But apparently Aunt Mathilda had impressed her so much that she now didn't want to rule anything out. Dr Jennings looked round as did Jupiter. Their eyes met over the rim of her glasses. She didn't make a face. It was hard to guess what was going on inside her. Eloise Adams had her eyes anxiously fixed on the glass. Her arm was trembling slightly and her breathing was shallow and rapid.

Jupiter felt the twinge of guilty conscience in him. Poor Mrs Adams. This story really got to her and The Three Investigators had nothing better to do than to scare her with this creepy show. But as Jupiter pursued the thought, it occurred to him that Mrs Adams might be cured of her belief in ghosts once and for all today. If the glass did not move, proving that the house was not haunted, she would be able to sleep more peacefully in the future. Ten minutes of fear was not too high a price to pay for that. And the glass should not move. How could it?

“Spirit, are you there?” Aunt Mathilda repeated and blinked briefly at the glass.

Nothing moved. Slowly Jupiter's arm became lame. Four minutes had passed. Why had Aunt Mathilda specified ten minutes? Probably the three ladies of the house would have been suspicious if the show had been over by now. But Jupiter wasn't sure his arm wouldn't fall off before then. Outside, the rain was lashing against the window. The storm was in full swing. Five minutes.

“Spirit, answer us!” murmured Aunt Mathilda fervently. There was lightning and thunder and the wind whistled around the walls. And then the glass moved!

Jupiter widened his eyes and stared at the middle of the table.

At first the stem trembled only slightly, but then the glass slowly slid over the Ouija board as if by itself and pulled Jupiter’s finger along with it. It took a single-minded direction and a few seconds later stopped exactly at its destination—the engraved ‘Yes’!

Jupiter’s mouth remained open in amazement. He stared at the board and then around. Miss O’Donnell and Dr Jennings, Pete and Bob, they were all frozen in place.

A single glance into their eyes revealed that no one was joking here. The worst hit were Aunt Mathilda and Eloise Adams. Mrs Adams clutched her chest with her left hand, while her right was shaking so badly that the glass would certainly have fallen over if it hadn’t been for the others. All colour had drained from her face.

Aunt Mathilda’s eyes reflected helplessness and despair. What was she to do now? Was the performance over? Or should she continue playing her part? Jupiter gave her a warning look.

Aunt Mathilda swallowed hard and continued in a croaky voice that lacked all mysticism: “Spirit, we... we are... I’m glad you’re... uh... that you’re here. We thank you. Can you, uh... can you tell us your name?” She looked at Jupiter questioningly.

The First Investigator nodded. He couldn’t think of anything better in a hurry. All eyes turned back to the wine glass. For a moment, it looked as if it would not move a second time. But then it trembled again and slid in a quiet movement to one of the letters. There it remained for a few seconds before continuing its way to the next letter. In this way, it criss-crossed the entire board four times, followed spellbound by all those present, who were spelling along in their minds:

D–O–R–A

A startled murmur went through the room. Eloise Adams even let out a little scream. She waved her free hand in front of her face as if she lacked fresh air. Her eyes widened in fear.

“Spirit...” Aunt Mathilda continued in a trembling voice. “Dora, speak to us!”

It took a few seconds and again the glass slid across the table, unerringly from letter to letter.

Mrs Adams’s breath quickened as everyone read the message:

S–O–M–E–O–N–E

Even as the glass remained on the letter ‘E’, Mrs Adams’s finger slipped down. Her eyelids fluttered and she gasped. “I feel so... I feel so...”

“Mrs Adams!” Bob, who was sitting next to her, caught her just in time.

“For goodness’ sake!” Miss O’Donnell cried. “She’s fainted!”

“No,” Mrs Adams breathed. “No, I just feel... dizzy. I have to...”

“Get her on the sofa!” shouted Dr Jennings, jumping from her chair.

Within seconds, there was a chaotic confusion. With combined forces, the obese Mrs Adams was carried to the couch. Miss O’Donnell fanned her with a handkerchief, Dr Jennings felt her pulse while Mrs Adams moaned softly—and Aunt Mathilda still stared stunned at the wooden board on which the tipped-over wine glass lay as motionless as if nothing had happened. The Three Investigators stood helplessly beside the table, undecided what to do.

Worthington stepped towards them and leaned forward conspiratorially. “There’s something I’m sure The Three Investigators are interested in.”

“What is it, Worthington?” asked Pete, the terror still in his limbs.

“Don’t look at the window! We are being watched.”

Jupiter listened and forced himself not to turn around.

“Excuse me?”

“A man is standing outside in the garden and peering into the room. I saw him when there was lightning.”

“How long has it been?”

“Since the beginning of the séance.”

It took Jupiter only seconds to come up with a plan. “We’ll get him! You take the front door, Pete, I’ll take the back door. We’ll come in from both sides. You stay here, Bob. If the guy tries to escape, you climb out through the window. Worthington, would you be willing to help us?”

“Of course.”

“Go outside with Pete and get into the Rolls-Royce! If the guy manages to run all the way to the road, chase him!”

“As the gentlemen wish!”

“Okay, and now very slowly and inconspicuously! We don’t want him to suspect anything!” Jupiter turned to Miss O’Donnell. “I’ll get a glass of water for Mrs Adams!”

“And I... er... a blanket!” Pete added and they left the living room immediately.

Accompanied by Worthington, the Second Investigator crept to the front door and opened it silently. Freezing rain hit him and pricked his face like tiny needles. He squinted, gave the chauffeur an encouraging look and scurried out into the garden.

It was so dark that he could barely see his hand in front of his eyes. The thick rain did the rest. All around him, only dark shadows were visible—trees, bushes, rose bushes. The ground beneath his feet was softened and each of his footprints instantly filled with water. Half blind, Pete stumbled forward until he reached the corner of the house. He pressed himself against the wall and risked a look.

Below the window to the living room stood a shiny dark figure! He stretched on tiptoe to the window ledge and peered into the room.

Had Jupiter already arrived at the other side of the house? Pete couldn’t make out anything in the darkness for the life of him. Better to give him another moment. The Second Investigator waited. Soon the rain had soaked him to the skin. The ice-cold water ran from his hair to his neck and then down his back.

A flash of lightning tore the darkness apart. There! In that brief moment, Pete caught sight of the First Investigator moving towards the dark figure. But not only Pete, the stranger had also seen Jupiter. He let go of the window and whirled around. He wanted to escape!

Pete sprinted off. The guy should not escape them!

Suddenly the window was torn open and Bob’s silhouette appeared in the illuminated frame. He sounded out the situation—and jumped out into the dark garden. Pete heard a muffled sound, someone cursing. A tangle of black bodies rolled across the wet lawn.

“Now let go, Bob!” cried Jupiter.

“Oh, it’s you! I thought—”

“Pete! The guy’s getting away! After him!”

But Pete saw nothing. Jupiter and Bob were lying on the ground, but the stranger...? He had disappeared.

“I think he’s disappeared behind the hedge!” cried Jupiter, getting to his feet.

But the hedge separating Dora Mastrantonio’s house from the neighbouring property was so high and dense that it was impossible to squeeze through.

“Maybe he ran to the road,” Bob gasped.

“Nonsense,” contradicted the Second Investigator. “Then he would have had to pass me.”

Nevertheless, The Three Investigators tried their luck and ran forward through the garden. The street was dark and deserted, a veil of atomized rain shone over the asphalt, gurgling under the manhole covers. The Rolls-Royce stood motionless in its place. The driver's door opened and Worthington got out. "Need a hand?"

"The guy got away from us! Did you see him, Worthington?"

"No. No one has appeared on the road."

"Curses!"

"But how is that possible, Jupe?" asked Pete. "He can't have disappeared into thin air!"

Jupiter stared out into the rain contritely. "But he did."

6. The Thing Stinks

When The Three Investigators and Worthington returned to the house, Mrs Adams had calmed down a little.

“Do you know what you look like?” cried Aunt Mathilda, half startled, half indignant, forgetting for a moment her role as medium.

Jupiter looked down at himself. Bob and he were not only soaked, but also completely filthy from their fall on the wet grass.

“Excuse me,” the First Investigator turned to everyone present, “but we saw someone at the window and tried to catch him. Unfortunately, he got away from us.”

“You saw someone?” repeated Mrs Adams in a trembling voice. “Dora’s spirit?” She opened her eyes and for a moment it looked as if she would faint after all.

“No, not a ghost,” Jupiter said firmly. “It was a man in a black mackintosh, that much I could make out. He has been watching everything that has happened in the living room for the last ten minutes.”

But Mrs Adams did not seem to be listening at all. “Dora’s spirit!” she said again. “I was right. She is here. Here, in this house. And you wouldn’t believe me!” She pushed herself up and sat upright.

She looked reproachfully at her friends. Miss O’Donnell and Dr Jennings bowed their heads guiltily.

“We’re sorry, Eloise,” Miss O’Donnell said. “I had no idea. Really, I thought you were imagining things. But now...” She turned to Aunt Mathilda. “I must apologize to you. I didn’t believe in your abilities at first... but now you have opened my eyes. Thank you!”

“I... uh... well...”

“Don’t be so hasty!” Jupiter spoke up. “Are you seriously saying that this house is haunted?”

“Well, I...” began Miss O’Donnell. “After all, the spirit has come forward and—”

“We’ve all seen it, haven’t we!” Mrs Adams exclaimed. “I even felt Dora! It was as if she was standing right next to me! How can you still doubt that?”

The First Investigator was backed into a corner. Of course he could tell the truth—that Aunt Mathilda was not a medium and it was all a hoax. But that would cast a grim light on their detective business. He had fallen into his own trap. So he tried another argument: “What about the man standing at the window?”

“What about him?” Miss O’Donnell asked.

“Don’t you find it strange that he was watching our séance the whole time? Or is it normal in these parts for strangers to stand at the window at night? Who was the man? What did he want? Isn’t it possible that he had something to do with the haunting?”

“I have no idea who he was or what he wanted,” Mrs Adams confessed. “But how could he have anything to do with Dora’s spirit? That’s nonsense, Jupiter! Why don’t we ask Mathilda? She is the medium, after all. You felt Dora’s presence too, didn’t you?”

“I...” Aunt Mathilda gave Jupiter a helpless look. “Well, I... don’t know how to say it. It was... well...” Her face very slowly turned red. “It was an extraordinary experience, because... because...”

“Because you can’t really remember at all, can you?” Worthington came to the rescue. “Isn’t it the case that during a séance that the medium falls into a trance state and afterwards hardly knows what actually happened?”

“Yes!” exclaimed Aunt Mathilda, a touch too loudly. “Yes, that’s exactly how it was! But that’s completely normal, you know. You can’t tell by looking at me, but I’m always completely out of it then. I call a spirit and don’t even notice it. Happens to me all the time. Crazy, isn’t it? And you know what? It was only a few minutes, but... I had to concentrate so hard, I’m completely exhausted now. I really need to rest. So I’d like a ride home now. Worthington, would you mind?”

“Of course, ma’am.”

“You’re leaving already?” asked Dr Jennings. “But the séance was interrupted in the middle! I thought we’d try again right away.”

“Out of the question!” said Aunt Mathilda quickly. “This is much too exhausting for me.”

“Well, maybe tomorrow then?” Dr Jennings suggested.

Aunt Mathilda forced herself to smile. “I’m really sorry, but I have a lot of appointments in the near future and I can’t estimate at all when I will next... You understand. I need to rest now. Good night!”

Aunt Mathilda folded up the Ouija board and put it back in her briefcase. “What about you three? Will you come with me?”

“Just a moment,” Jupiter said.

“Fine. I’ll wait in the car.”

Worthington indicated a farewell bow, then led Aunt Mathilda outside.

Now the three ladies of the house sat on the red velvet sofa, The Three Investigators facing them dripping.

“Well,” Miss O’Donnell began with a smile. “I admit the evening went differently than expected, but at least now we have certainty.”

“What are you going to do now?” asked Pete. “Move in here anyway?”

“Absolutely not!” cried Mrs Adams quickly. “Especially not now!”

“We will talk about it later,” Dr Jennings replied calmly, as if she had not heard her friend.

Jupiter cleared his throat. “For us, too, the evening went differently than expected. I confess that the surprising events have aroused my curiosity. I’d like to think about what happened and get back to you, if you don’t mind.”

Mrs Adams and Dr Jennings exchanged suspicious glances, but Miss O’Donnell was immediately enthusiastic. “Of course! You are always welcome!”

“Thank you very much,” Jupe said.

The Three Investigators said goodbye and left the Mastrantonio villa. The rain had subsided, the thunderstorm had moved on. Only scattered weather glow illuminated the cloudy night sky.

The Three Investigators got into the Rolls-Royce, the back seat of which Worthington had already covered with plastic foil to protect the valuable upholstery.

“Drive us home, Worthington,” Jupiter said wearily.

“Very well, gentlemen.”

“By the way, you reacted magnificently when Aunt Mathilda was cornered,” Jupe said.

“Thank you very much. I had a good teacher.” Worthington gave him a sly look through the rear-view mirror.

They drove in silence for a while, then Aunt Mathilda blurted out: “I had no idea! I really did call a spirit! Isn’t that incredible? Titus will think I’m crazy!”

“Aunt Mathilda.”

“Yes?”

“You didn’t call a spirit.”

“Didn’t I?”

“No!”

“But the glass... we all saw it move.”

“I know it moved,” Jupiter replied irritably. “But that doesn’t mean we were dealing with a ghost.”

“No?” Pete now asked. “I had actually thought—”

“Pete!” said Jupiter reproachfully. “As far as I am concerned, there are no ghosts! There has to be some other reason for it.”

“Well, yes, but... what else could it have been?”

“I have no idea. But if I listen to my gut, I know one thing one hundred percent—this thing stinks. An hour ago I thought the whole story had nothing to do with detective work at all. But now I’m sure The Three Investigators have a new case!”

7. The Power of the Subconscious

When Bob Andrews entered Headquarters the next day, he carried a folder under his arm with a stack of papers spilling out of it. After school, he had been at the library, as Jupiter had instructed him to do some research. There was a lot of material, as Pete and Jupiter saw when he slammed the folder of notes and copies down on the table.

“We did it all wrong,” Bob announced.

“Excuse me?” asked Pete.

“Yesterday... at the séance,” Bob said. “Actually, it shouldn’t have worked at all because we pretty much disregarded every golden rule for such sessions.”

Jupiter sat up straight and rubbed his hands together excitedly. “Go ahead, Bob, I’m excited!”

“Well, first of all, you don’t actually use glass for a Ouija board,” Bob continued. “You use a little wooden plaque known as a planchette.”

“Well, when I found the Ouija board in the old junk boxes, I didn’t see a little wooden plaque there,” Jupiter defended himself.

Bob waved it off. “Never mind. That’s not so important. Point two is more crucial—you don’t need a medium at all for the planchette to move. On the contrary, the group of people participating is crucial.”

“The spirit obviously didn’t care,” Pete remarked.

“But it should have...” Bob said, “because if you ask me, yesterday there were six out of seven people who didn’t believe in it.”

Jupiter nodded thoughtfully. “You’re right about that, though. What else?”

“Little things,” Bob replied, leafing through his papers. “For example, no one should have broken eye contact with the planchette to ensure success.”

“But all that didn’t interest Dora’s spirit,” Pete said hesitantly. “I mean, the glass moved, didn’t it? How do you explain that?”

“It’s very simple—at least one of the people present must have caused the movement of the glass with a finger,” Jupiter said.

“Sure,” Pete said. “I was already that clever, but that doesn’t make any sense! It wasn’t us three and it certainly wasn’t your aunt. Miss O’Donnell and Dr Jennings couldn’t have done it either, because after all they wanted to prove that it wasn’t haunted. And Mrs Adams was far too frightened of the spirit. She would certainly have preferred it if Dora’s spirit had not made itself known. So that really leaves only the spirit itself, which could have moved the glass... or have I missed something?”

“Well,” Bob began. “I’ve picked up some knowledge about the Ouija board. It’s more complicated than you might think at first.”

“In what way, Bob?” Jupiter asked.

“Many people believe that during a Ouija board session, the spirit moves the planchette. Some people, on the other hand, claim that the planchette is moved by unconscious muscle twitches of the participants. This is known as the ideomotor phenomenon. It becomes more likely the longer the session lasts. After all, at some point the arm becomes lame and can move on its own without anyone really noticing. The fact that several people are involved

means that different forces act on the planchette from different directions—and the sum of these forces pushes it across the board.”

The Second Investigator frowned. “But if it was all just coincidence, then there would never be any answers that made sense!”

“Yes, it does. Because the moment the planchette starts moving, the participants’ subconscious comes into play. At first, everyone is surprised by the movement itself. But just a second later, everyone has an idea of what answer could come up. Unconsciously, this idea is then translated into a movement of the arm—and the answer is exactly what one expects. In our case, this was logically ‘Dora’.

“The interesting thing is that even ghost believers support this theory. They admit that it is their own arm movements that cause the planchette to slide across the board. However, they do not believe that their own subconscious takes the lead, but the spirit of the deceased driving into the bodies of those present and controlling them to some degree. And that, of course, is difficult to prove or disprove.”

Jupiter sighed and slumped back in his chair. “That was excellent work, Bob! The new information sheds some light.”

“Really?” asked Pete doubtfully. “Not for me.”

“Yes, Pete. In principle, there are now three possibilities that explain what happened last night. Firstly, one of those present is playing a false game for reasons as yet unknown and has deliberately moved the glass in the right direction. Secondly, the glass was moved by one of those present, but unintentionally. Mrs Adams, whose belief in ghosts is so strong that her subconscious could have taken control of her body and made her greatest fear come true, would be the most likely candidate. Thirdly, none of those present were responsible for the movement of the glass, but there is some trick behind it that we have not yet seen through. In this case, I would like to suggest that the stranger at the window is playing a bigger role.”

“Well, then everything is quite simple,” Pete said mockingly.

Jupiter skipped the point. “No, it isn’t. We have a lot of work to do to test these theories, but it’s nothing we can’t manage.”

“What do you suggest?” asked Bob.

“The logical course of action is to repeat yesterday’s attempt. This time, however, with the necessary precautions.”

“Another séance?” asked Pete, trying not to let his uneasy feeling show. “I know you don’t want to hear about it, Jupe, but isn’t it possible that it really was Dora’s spirit speaking to us? Shouldn’t we leave it alone then?”

The First Investigator rolled his eyes. “Firstly, Pete, it wasn’t Dora’s spirit. And secondly, if it was, don’t you care what she has to say?”

“To be honest—”

The ringing of the telephone interrupted him. Jupiter switched on the loudspeaker and answered it. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“Hello, Jupiter, this is Bernadette O’Donnell. I’m glad I caught you. You know, Cecilia and I have been thinking about last night.”

“So have we.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes,” Jupiter said. “And we noticed that there are still a lot of unanswered questions.”

“Well, something like that!” Miss O’Donnell said. “We came to the same conclusion! One question above all—Dora spoke to us. She wanted to tell us something, remember? She began with the words ‘Someone has’. Then Eloise fainted. We wonder how the message would have gone on. And so we thought... well... we’d like to repeat the session... today.”

Jupiter was surprised. He had rather expected to have to persuade the occupants of the Mastrantonio villa to have a second meeting, not that they would come up with it on their own. He gave Bob and Pete a questioning look. Bob nodded in agreement. Pete shook his head hesitantly.

“We’re in,” Jupiter said good-humouredly.

“That’s what I was hoping!” exclaimed Miss O’Donnell in relief. “And I thought that since you have such a good rapport with Mathilda, maybe you could persuade her to... you know.”

“She won’t come,” Jupiter replied. “But it won’t be necessary either. I’ll explain it to you tonight.” Jupiter didn’t give her a chance to follow up. “We’ll come after sunset as usual. See you then!”

“Thank you,” Pete said after Jupiter had hung up. “Thank you for not asking for my opinion at all.”

“You were outvoted,” Jupiter replied tersely.

“And do you think we’ll find out more tonight?” asked Bob. “That it will be different from yesterday? That it will work at all?”

“It will work,” Jupiter was convinced. “And we will solve the mystery... because this time we will be prepared.”

When Jupiter crawled around in the flower bed below the living room window of the Mastrantonio Villa, it was already so dark that Bob and Pete could hardly see what the First Investigator was doing there. They knew only one thing—these were the preparations Jupiter had spoken of.

“What are you doing?” Pete whispered, because the ladies in the house had no idea about this business.

Finally, he squatted down next to Jupiter. The First Investigator had poured a white powder on the bed and was now covering it with a very thin layer of earth. “I’m setting a trap. If the unknown person comes back today and escapes from us a second time, we will be able to track him excellently by his white footprints,” Jupiter explained. “And so that he doesn’t notice, I sprinkle some soil over the flour.”

“Flour?” asked Bob.

“It doesn’t always have to be high-tech equipment, does it?”

“Let’s hope the plan works then,” Bob said.

“I’d prefer it if the guy didn’t show up at all,” Pete objected. “I found it creepy enough yesterday being watched by that black figure.”

Suddenly a shrill female voice spoke behind them: “Hey! What are you doing here?”

Pete whirled around. Behind him, the thick hedge to the neighbouring property loomed in the darkness. The woman who had spoken was apparently standing on the other side.

He could not see her. “Do you mean us?”

“Of course I mean you!” she nagged. “Get out of there or I’ll call the police!”

“Well, listen!” Bob became indignant. “Who are you anyway?”

“Mrs Willow. I live here. And I know very well you have no business in Dora’s garden! You’re trampling her beautiful roses! Get out!”

“You don’t seem to realize that this is no longer Dora’s garden,” Bob snapped back. “The house belongs to Mrs Adams now.”

“Of course I know that, but are you trying to tell me you are Mrs Adams?”

“We have an appointment with her,” Jupiter said as calmly as possible.

“In her flower bed? Ha! If you don’t leave right now, my husband will get his shotgun!”

“Tell me, are you still in your right mind?” hissed Bob.

Jupiter put his hand on Bob’s shoulder reassuringly. “Forget it, Bob. There are people like that. There’s nothing you can do about it. Let’s go to the front door.”

The Three Investigators circled the house and the neighbour’s nagging grew quieter.

This time it was Cecilia Jennings who opened the door and led them into the living room. Jupiter looked at her attentively. She had her hair down and immediately looked several years younger. The austerity had disappeared from her face. After her cool, reserved manner the day before, she seemed much more open today.

“Thank you for coming,” she said warmly as The Three Investigators entered the living room. Miss O’Donnell and Eloise Adams were not there. “It’s just a pity Mathilda can’t be with us. Do you think Dora’s spirit will even answer us without her help?”

“We’ll see,” Jupiter replied. “Tell me, Dr Jennings, you seem so changed today. Weren’t you the most sceptical of all yesterday?”

She laughed. “I certainly was. But until then, no spirit had spoken to me. To make contact with my dear friend Dora was... simply overwhelming. If I’d known Eloise was right all along, I certainly wouldn’t have been so nasty to her.”

The Three Investigators exchanged meaningful glances. Now even Dr Jennings was obsessed with the belief in ghosts. This was going to be fun.

While The Three Investigators waited for the other two ladies, Dr Jennings crossed the living room with a long fireplace match and lit all the candles. “You know, we talked about the incidents for a very long time last night... and Eloise has convinced me. Dora is here, her spirit still lives in this house... and she has a message for us. We just have to find out what she wants to tell us.”

Before any of the three could reply, Mrs Adams and Miss O’Donnell entered the room. Bob was startled when he saw Mrs Adams. She looked ten years older. Her face was grey and sunken and there was something unsteady and hurried in her glazed gaze. She was so weak that Miss O’Donnell had to support her and she looked as if she hadn’t slept a wink last night.

“Poor Eloise is not well today,” Bernadette said when she noticed Bob’s distraught face. “All that took a lot out of her yesterday.”

“Well, we can postpone the session,” Bob said quickly. He felt sorry for the old lady.

“No, no, the sooner we find out what Dora wants to tell us, the sooner the haunting will be over, I am quite sure,” Miss O’Donnell said. “Come, sit down, my dear.”

Mrs Adams staggered over to the round table and took a seat. Bob was almost heartbroken at the way she stared anxiously at the centre of the table, even though the Ouija board hadn’t even been set up yet. Unbeknownst to her, Mrs Adams owed her condition in part to them, The Three Investigators.

Bob cleared his throat. “I think I forgot to lock my bike. Jupe, if I remember correctly, you didn’t either.”

“The bicycle?” Jupiter wondered, irritated. “Yes, I think I have—”

“Don’t worry, nothing gets stolen in this area,” Miss O’Donnell said.

“I just want to make sure,” Bob insisted. “Come on, Jupe.”

“But I—”

“Come with me!” Bob said so emphatically that Jupiter got up and followed him outside.

“What’s the matter with you, Bob?” murmured Jupiter as they left the house.

“I wanted to talk to you in private. It’s about Mrs Adams. The poor thing’s a mess. She can’t stand another shock like last night. I think we should call off the session.”

The First Investigator shook his head. “Then we’ll never find out the secret.”

“But look at them!”

“Bob,” Jupiter said quietly. “Your compassion for Mrs Adams is admirable. But if we don’t go through with the séance, the three ladies will end up doing it on their own and nothing would be gained.”

Bob sighed. He didn’t like it, but Jupiter was right.

“Then we should at least tell them the truth about Aunt Mathilda.”

“Out of the question,” Jupe insisted. “We will tell the truth, but only when the mystery of Dora’s ghost is solved.”

“But... our show last night makes Mrs Adams think she was dealing with a ghost all the more!”

“Do you think it would convince her otherwise if she found out that Aunt Mathilda is not a medium at all? No, Bob. Mrs Adams wants to believe in a ghost! Neither logical arguments nor the truth about Aunt Mathilda will dissuade her. What we need is solid evidence. Until then, we’re going to keep playing this game. All right?”

Bob struggled with himself. He was deeply reluctant to conceal the truth while watching Mrs Adams suffer. But Jupiter, as usual, had thought the matter through to the end and had been right.

“Quite apart from that, we only make ourselves unworthy by telling the truth and risk Miss O’Donnell taking us off the case. Then we won’t be able to help Mrs Adams any more. So, we’re going to go back in there and act like nothing happened, okay, Bob?”

Bob nodded with a heavy heart and they returned to the house. By now everyone was sitting in their seats. Pete had set up the Ouija board and placed the wine glass in the middle. He suspected that Jupiter and Bob were talking about something other than their bicycles, but he restrained his curiosity and said nothing.

“Mathilda told me yesterday that it was possible to contact the spirit without her assistance,” Jupiter said as he took his place at the round table. “So I suggest we do everything exactly as we did yesterday.”

“Yes,” Miss O’Donnell said solemnly. “Hopefully Dora will be able to give us her message in full today.” She cleared her throat. “Let us begin!”

As on the previous day, everyone placed their fingers on the rim of the glass. Then Miss O’Donnell took over Aunt Mathilda’s role and said with devotion: “I ask you to concentrate! Dora, can you hear us? Are you with us, Dora?”

Nothing moved. But this time, The Three Investigators were highly concentrated—not only on the glass or the board or the ghost, but on everything else that was happening in the room. Every movement, every blink and every breath of the three women was registered attentively. Jupiter kept glancing at the window to keep an eye out for the stranger.

Pete scanned the floor under the table very slowly with his foot, looking for a clue, a hidden mechanism or anything else. Bob watched closely for anything stirring in the dark shadows between the furniture and in the corners of the room.

“Answer us, Dora!” repeated Miss O’Donnell fervently. “Are you there?”

Suddenly the glass moved, first with a jerk, then it slid quietly to the word ‘yes’. A murmur went through the room.

“We’re sorry we had to break off contact yesterday,” Miss O’Donnell continued. “What did you want to tell us? What was your message?”

Little by little, the glass slid from letter to letter. First it repeated the words from the previous day:

S-O-M-E-O-N-E-

Eloise Adams's breathing became so rapid that Bob feared she would faint again. But then his attention was fully occupied by the rest of the message. His blood ran cold in his veins:

K-I-L-L-E-D-M-E

8. On Behalf of a Ghost

Time seemed to stand still. For seconds, no one moved, no one dared to breathe. Bob even had the impression that his own heartbeat had stopped. Then Eloise Adams toppled from her chair.

“Mrs Adams!” Bob cried.

In seconds, she was surrounded by her friends and The Three Investigators.

“Carry her over there!” Dr Jennings shouted and together they hoisted Mrs Adams onto the red sofa. Dr Jennings stuffed all available pillows under her legs. “Open the window!”

Pete hurried to obey Dr Jennings’s order. As a cool breeze blew through the living room, the doctor felt Mrs Adams’s pulse. The woman’s face was chalky white. Dr Jennings shook her head anxiously. “This doesn’t look good. Her pulse is very weak. Bernadette, we need an ambulance!”

“But Cecilia, do you really mean—”

“I’m a doctor, Bernadette! Call an ambulance!”

When the ambulance arrived, Mrs Adams had regained consciousness but was unable to sit up under her own power. Dr Jennings and the paramedics agreed to have her taken to the hospital for observation and keep her there overnight.

Mrs Adams agreed—she liked nothing better than to leave this house as soon as possible. Miss O’Donnell had decided to accompany her and the three friends left the house. So The Three Investigators were alone for a few minutes.

“Poor Mrs Adams!” said Bob. “For a moment I thought she was having a heart attack. Perhaps we should have told her the truth after all. If she’d known Aunt Mathilda wasn’t a medium, she might not have got so upset.”

“Oh no?” said Jupiter. “But Aunt Mathilda wasn’t here at all today, in case you hadn’t noticed, and yet the séance was a complete success. Believe me, that wouldn’t have calmed Mrs Adams down one bit.”

“Well, maybe you’re right,” Bob admitted.

“It was definitely a success for us,” said Pete, grinning victoriously. “Because I paid very close attention to the movement of the glass. And I now know who moved it!”

“Namely who?” asked Jupiter tensely.

“Dr Jennings,” Pete murmured with a sideways glance at the door. “If you looked closely, you could see that the glass was following her arm, not the other way around.”

“Really?” Jupiter seemed disappointed. “Well, I wasn’t asleep either. But my observations revealed something completely different. If you ask me, it was clearly Miss O’Donnell!”

Bob looked uncertainly from one to the other. He cleared his throat sheepishly. “I don’t want to disillusion you, but as absurd as it sounds, I suspect Mrs Adams! Her finger was always pulling and pushing something, I saw it clearly!”

“You can’t be serious!” said Jupiter and Pete at the same time.

“Yes, I am.”

“Wonderful,” Jupe said. “Each of us observed something different.”

“And you believe, of course, that only your observation is the correct one,” Pete surmised.

“No. I believe that the investigation of such a case is more complicated than I had first assumed,” Jupe said. “Six fingers on a glass, minimal forces acting in different directions—all of this means that no accurate guess can be made, even with the most careful observation. So we don’t get anywhere like that. Have you seen or heard anything else out of the ordinary?”

But Bob and Pete shook their heads.

“I’m afraid I don’t either,” Jupiter said in frustration. “And our mysterious visitor hasn’t turned up a second time. That means we’re back to square one.”

“And what do we do now?” asked Pete.

“We care about what Dora’s spirit seems to be about—her death.”

At that moment, Dr Jennings returned. “That awful Mrs Willow!”

“Do you mean the neighbour?” asked Jupiter.

“Yes, of course she noticed that there was an ambulance at the door and looked like it was a matter of life and death,” Dr Jennings said.

Exhausted, she sat down on the sofa and slumped her shoulders. Then she looked at The Three Investigators worriedly.

“Poor Eloise! Maybe we shouldn’t have put her through all that.”

“Yes,” said Jupiter. “Maybe.”

“I must confess, even if I am not as unstable as Eloise, Dora’s message shocked me too. She was killed! In this house! My goodness! I don’t know if I can sleep peacefully tonight. Maybe I should go back to my old apartment, at least until the other two are back.”

“So you believe in the message?” It was more of a statement than a question.

“Why should I doubt Dora’s words?”

“It’s all right,” Jupiter relented. “So let’s assume it really was Dora who contacted us. Who could have killed her? And why? And how?”

“How should I know?”

“Didn’t they say she had an accident?” Jupe asked.

“That was what happened,” Dr Jennings confirmed. “She fell down the stairs. But what looked like an accident could still have been murder—you’ve seen it on TV.”

“Can you tell us more about it?” asked Jupiter. “Who found her?”

“It was her cleaning lady. She had a key, came into the house one afternoon and saw poor Dora lying at the foot of the stairs. She immediately called an emergency doctor, but by then it was already too late. He could only issue the death certificate.”

“Did Dora have any enemies?”

“Enemies?” repeated Dr Jennings incredulously. “Dora Mastrantonio was a gifted opera star! She had fans, admirers, but no enemies!”

“Maybe someone who didn’t begrudge her success,” Bob suggested.

But Dr Jennings shook her head resolutely. “No, I don’t know anything about that. But perhaps you should ask Eloise. She was closer to Dora.”

Jupiter nodded. “We will do that as soon as she is better.”

“But tell me, you three—it almost sounds like an interrogation. Are you planning to investigate this case?”

“Well, since we failed to bring Miss O’Donnell’s case to a successful conclusion, it stands to reason that we should now address Dora’s concern, doesn’t it?”

“Dora’s concern?” Dr Jennings wondered.

“If it is indeed true that Mrs Mastrantonio was murdered, surely it would be in her best interests for us to solve her murder,” Jupe explained.

“You’re right about that, though,” Dr Jennings agreed.

It took Pete a moment to realize what this meant. When he finally put it into words, he wasn’t sure whether the hairs on the back of his neck stood up in fear or because the matter was literally hair-raising. “Wait a minute, Jupe. Are you saying we’re investigating on behalf of a ghost from now on?”

The First Investigator grinned. “That’s right, Pete.”

“This is... this is absolutely crazy!”

“Absolutely,” Jupiter admitted bluntly. “In other words, very much to my taste.”

Darren Higman lived in a small row house painted bright pink on a busy street in Santa Monica. The sea and the harbour were close enough to hear the crash of the waves and the rumble of the engines. Bob chained his bike to a street lamp and enjoyed the sun and fresh air for a moment.

After The Three Investigators had left the Mastrantonio villa the previous evening, Jupiter had instructed Bob to find out everything he could about Dora Mastrantonio. Normally Bob did this kind of research in the library or in the newspaper archives, but when it came to the subject of music, he had a much better source—Jelena Charkova, the daughter of a Russian music professor and friend of The Three Investigators.

He had called her and told her the problem. She had immediately thought of someone who could help Bob—Darren Higman, a friend of the Charkov family and also an avid opera fan. Jelena assured her that he was a Mastrantonio expert, and so Bob had gone to Santa Monica right after school to pay Mr Higman a visit.

He walked up to the front door and rang the bell. A moment later, he heard footsteps and the door was opened. Standing opposite him was a tall, dark-haired man in his thirties, looking at him out of strangely bright eyes—rather, he seemed to be staring at Bob’s hairstyle.

“Good afternoon, are you Mr Higman?”

“That’s me. And you must be Bob. Jelena called me and gave me a heads up. Welcome!” Mr Higman reached out and missed Bob’s right hand by a full twenty centimetres. It was then that Bob realized what Mr Higman’s strange eye colour was all about.

Darren Higman was blind.

9. The Blind Fan

Bob quickly grabbed Mr Higman's hand, trying not to let his surprise show.

"Thank you. It's really nice of you to have time for me," Bob said.

"Always happy to. I work at home in my own recording studio, you know. And a little diversion to get me out of work is always very welcome." He smiled and invited Bob in.

Higman's house was simple and functional, even a little cool at first glance. But Bob realized that this impression was mainly due to the lack of any room decoration. There were logically no pictures on the walls and the colour combination of walls, furniture and carpets was very daring in places. Nevertheless, Darren Higman's domicile was anything but boring. There was a CD rack on almost every wall—and they were all full. It was hard to estimate, but there must be close to ten thousand CDs in Higman's house. On top of that, there were several thousand more records.

"Wow!" marvelled Bob, who was a big music fan himself. "Are they all yours?"

"Yes. I earn my living with music... and with sounds. I work for various movie studios in sound editing, make sounds myself and push the sliders up and down until the soundtrack sounds perfect. On the side, I make music for commercials and write record reviews."

"That's fascinating," Bob said, wondering at the same time how Darren Higman managed to find the right CD when he couldn't see it. But he didn't dare ask his question aloud.

Higman led him without a single misstep into a combination of living room and recording studio. An impressive set-up consisting of mixers, recorders, computers, turntables, speakers and amplifiers dominated an entire wall. Again, it was a mystery to Bob how Mr Higman, a blind man, found his way around the jumble of switches, knobs and cables.

"Dora Mastrantonio," Darren Higman opened the conversation after they had sat down, and he spoke her name with devotion. "A great artist who sadly passed away far too soon. I assure you, I can tell you pretty much anything about her musical career. You just have to tell me what you want to know."

"Actually, her career is not what that interests me," Bob confessed.

"So?" Higman's disappointment was plain to see. "Then what do you want to know?"

Bob did not know what to tell the man. He had no idea what he was looking for himself. "Maybe something about her private life, her friends... and enemies."

"Well, she had friends and enemies aplenty, like any star," Higman said. "The question is who were her true friends? Many have followed her in the wake of her fame, but very few really cared about her as a person. There were many disappointments in her life, especially at the beginning of her career, when time and again supposed friends turned out to be free-loaders who only wanted to take advantage of her. There was a time when she was very bitter about this. But over the years, she became tougher—perhaps too hard. On her part, she took advantage of the fake friends to show them that they could not do anything to her. She became more selfish and ruthless.

"Many people say that fame spoiled her. After her husband's death, she had numerous affairs, but she dropped one lover after the next like a hot potato. All she ever cared about was professional advancement, contacts, and last but not least, fun... but never about love.

“In the last few years, when she was less and less on stage, she had the reputation of a desirable but dangerous heartbreaker. Men were virtually queuing up at her door, which was probably not least due to her breathtaking appearance. But I’m afraid I can’t judge that.”

Darren Higman smiled wryly. “Dora Mastrantonio certainly liked the role of a seductress... and above all, it didn’t detract from her popularity. The tabloids loved her for her dissolute life and so she was still a big star years after her greatest musical successes—until her tragic death.”

Bob nodded. Slowly the name Mastrantonio became a flesh and blood person in his mind. “And what about her friends?”

“There were some who were very close to her. In an interview, Dora Mastrantonio once said she planned to move in with her three best friends when she got older. But the very best friend she had was certainly Mrs Adams.”

“Eloise Adams?”

“Yes, exactly! She often accompanied her to gigs and was constantly around her. But unlike many others, she was never concerned with basking in Dora’s glory. Mrs Adams was completely selfless—a true friend. That’s probably why she inherited the Mastrantonio villa.”

“Do you know anything about the other two?”

“No. They were never in the public eye. One is a doctor, I think, but that’s where my knowledge ends.”

“Let’s move on to her enemies,” Bob said. “Who comes to mind off the top of your head?”

“A lot of people,” Darren Higman said immediately. “But no one in particular. There were a lot of people who couldn’t stand Dora Mastrantonio—cheated wives, people who begrudged her success, people who thought her glamorous appearance was put-on and overdone, envious singers—the list is endless. But there wasn’t really anyone who particularly hated her, if that’s what you mean.”

“Not even in their private sphere?”

“Not that I know of. But why do you ask?” Higman laughed softly. “It almost sounds like Dora Mastrantonio was murdered.”

Bob was glad that Mr Higman could not see his face. It would have given him away immediately. But unfortunately he couldn’t think of an answer in a hurry... and his silence was enough of an answer.

Higman’s grin gave way to an expression of shock. “You’re not serious, are you? Jelena told me you are a detective. And that you are investigating some case with your friends. She... she didn’t say it was a murder case!”

“I... we don’t know,” Bob finally brought out.

“She was murdered?”

“We don’t know yet,” repeated Bob emphatically. “We’re still at the very beginning of the investigation. Anyway, I think I have to go now, Mr Higman.”

Darren Higman did not seem in the least reassured. “If this is really true—”

“We don’t have anything concrete at the moment, Mr Higman, believe me.”

“If you need more information, you can definitely contact me!” assured Mr Higman.

“Thank you very much. I will come back to this.”

Bob hurried to leave Darren Higman’s house.

While Bob was in Santa Monica, Jupiter had again made his way to Malibu. This time, however, it was not because of Miss O’Donnell, Mrs Adams or Dr Jennings, but because of

their neighbours, Mr and Mrs Willow.

Dr Jennings had put him up to it when she was outraged by Mrs Willow's curiosity the night before. Jupiter knew from experience that nosy neighbours were often a first-class source of information—and thus exactly what the First Investigator now needed. Now he was standing in the Willows' garden, looking around helplessly.

"I don't think you've lost anything on this property, young man!"

Jupiter flinched and turned around. Behind him stood Mrs Willow, armed with a hedge trimmer. For a moment, the First Investigator feared she would actually attack him with the garden tool as she looked so hostile.

"You're right about that, ma'am. I am sorry. It was not my intention to trespass."

"So why are you here?"

"I am looking for you, Mrs Willow."

"That's me."

She came closer and eyed Jupiter with her eyebrows drawn together, her mouth pinched into a thin line. She wore a dirty smock apron, her hands were full of soil and her grey hair was tied back with a headscarf.

Behind her, in the other corner of the garden, a pot-bellied man with a half bald head was busy cleaning garden tools and putting them away in a small wooden shed. He was standing right by the hedge that separated the property from that of the Mastrantonio villa. The man looked over, but when their eyes met, he hastily went back to his work.

"I know you! You're one of those kids who were snooping around over there last night!"

"I am one of the three boys who investigated something there yesterday," Jupiter corrected. "My name is Jupiter Jones."

"Investigated? Investigated what?"

"We work on behalf of Miss O'Donnell. I assume you know her?"

"Of course I know her!" hissed Mrs Willow. "One of the new ones! And what do you want from me now?"

"Well, to be honest..." Jupiter lowered his voice and leaned forward conspiratorially. "The three ladies next door seem a bit strange to me. I was hoping you could tell me a few things about them."

Mrs Willow grinned maliciously. "Strange, are they? Oh yes, they certainly are. Three women under one roof—that can only end strangely! Oh, I could fill whole books with it!"

"You see, that's what I thought. That's why I came to you."

Mrs Willow eyed him unabashedly from top to bottom. Jupiter could read her face like a book. She was undecided what to make of him. But gradually the urge to gossip about her neighbours and maybe even learn something new grew and washed away the last doubts.

"All right," she said finally, wiping her hands on her apron. "Let's go into the house. We won't be disturbed there."

Then she turned around and shouted: "John!"

The man by the woodshed winced. "What are you yelling for?"

"You've been carrying your tools from one corner to the other all day! Why don't you take care of the hedge instead of loafing around in your shed? I have a visitor!"

Without waiting for an answer, she dropped the hedge trimmer and led Jupiter inside.

10. The Nosy Neighbour

The Willow couple's living room was a bourgeois nightmare. The couch set would have made even Aunt Mathilda's hair stand on end—and she was not the most tasteful woman when it came to interior design. Jupiter made an effort to look past the crocheted doilies and the ghastly vases with straw flower arrangements. There was a shotgun in a display case polished to a high sheen—so Mrs Willow's threat the night before of her husband's shotgun had not been an empty threat.

It was no problem to get Mrs Willow to talk. After Jupiter had made her understand that he was on her side, she was hardly restrained and revealed many things that he wanted to know—and much more.

Mrs Willow had hated her neighbour Dora Mastrantonio. Her singing, her fame, her rose garden, her fans who turned up in the street now and then, not to mention reporters—Mrs Willow had found it all utterly abhorrent.

“A terrible person! The daily howling! Scales up and down! And do you think she would have shown consideration for the neighbours even once and closed the windows? No! You could hear her warbling all the way to the coastal road! After all, she was a star! And then all this important fuss! She got on our last nerve!

“And she was dressed flamboyantly—not only when she had a performance, no! Always! Every day! But no wonder, with the wear and tear she had.” Mrs Willow stuck her nose up in pique.

“Wear and tear?”

“Men! I tell you, it was a constant coming and going! A scandal!”

It went on like this for half an hour until Jupiter managed to steer the topic in another direction. Mrs Willow had hated Mrs Mastrantonio, but she hated her three new neighbours even more.

“But they've only been living there for a few days.”

“It's bad enough they moved in there in the first place! Besides, I know the three of them from before. They used to visit Mrs Mastrantonio all the time! I've never seen anything as stuck-up as those three women—especially that witch Cecilia Jennings. Oh, I'm sorry. I mean, Dr Jennings. She thinks she's better than everyone else. But then she was in good company with Mrs Mastrantonio...

“And Miss O'Donnell, ha! She always acts so nice and friendly and whistles silly kissy-kissy stuff all day—terrible! She's so pushy with her fake friendliness! And she can't stand me any more than I can stand her. It used to be just one neighbour, but now we have three of them! I tell you, we would carefully consider moving away... but that might suit them over there! Ha!”

“And what about Mrs Adams?” asked Jupiter.

“Mrs Adams? One could almost feel sorry for her. Such a helpless, dependent person. She used to hang around here all the time, since she was supposedly our opera star's best friend. But if you ask me, she was more like her lackey! She did everything for Dora, followed her everywhere like a little puppy. Dora this, Dora that. And this despite the fact that Dora Mastrantonio had a thing with Mrs Adams's husband some fifteen years ago!”

Mrs Willow looked at Jupiter triumphantly. “Yes, you’re amazed, aren’t you? I tell you, it’s an incredible story! Dora Mastrantonio had an affair with Mr Adams. And what happens? You’d think the two women would have clawed their eyes out when it came out. But no, they became best friends! Real bosom buddies, even!

“Sometimes you had the impression that they were lovers! But who knows, maybe Adams was just taking advantage of our opera star. I wouldn’t be surprised if she had a little help in that alleged fall from the stairs—revenge... or greed. You know how it is.”

“Mrs Willow!” said Jupiter indignantly. “That is a most serious accusation!”

“Sheesh... I don’t care! I’m just telling it like it is. The other neighbours just don’t dare say it, but everyone actually knows it. Mrs Adams was either a pitiful person who was a slave to Dora Mastrantonio—or she’s a cunning beast who wanted to get her hands on the villa—and in the end succeeded! In any case, for what went on and still goes on over there in that villa, ‘strange’ is an outright understatement!”

In the late afternoon, The Three Investigators met on the beach at Rocky Beach. For once, Pete had insisted on holding their briefing not in their musty headquarters, but in the open air. The sun was tilting blood-red towards the horizon, painting glowing streaks in the Pacific.

Bob and Jupiter lay lazily on the sand, stretching all fours. Pete, who had jogged a lap of the promenade before his friends arrived, did some stretching and loosening exercises while listening to his friends’ reports.

“What did you actually tell Mrs Willow about how you knew the three ladies and why you were interested in all this?” Pete wanted to know after Jupiter had finished.

The First Investigator laughed. “Nothing at all. She had talked herself into such a frenzy that she never even asked me about it in the end. I tell you, fellas, if we need more information, Mrs Willow is a gold mine. You have to remember, though, to subtract about eighty per cent of her report for exaggeration.”

Bob nodded. “What about you, Pete? Did you have any success?”

Pete finished his exercise and sat down in the sand with the others. “I was with the cleaning lady, Ana Maria Gomez.”

“Well?”

“A terribly emotional woman,” Pete said. “When I mentioned the name Dora Mastrantonio, she almost burst into tears. She put her hands in front of her face and whined in Spanish for half an hour before she calmed down.”

Jupiter grinned to himself. He could imagine Pete desperate with his innate impatience. “Unfortunately, it didn’t get any better after that. She told me in great detail exactly what had happened. Unfortunately not just once, but at least ten times—and each new version was even more dramatic than the previous one. I really know the story by heart now.”

“Then please tell us,” Bob said.

“In a realistic version,” added the First Investigator.

Pete cleared his throat and tried to make his voice sound like that of a newscaster: “Ana Maria Gomez entered Dora Mastrantonio’s villa on the afternoon of the fifteenth of March, punctually to the minute, as usual—at exactly four o’clock. She always attached great importance to her punctuality. She told me at least a hundred times that in the eight years she had worked for Mrs Mastrantonio she had never once been late.

“She had her own key. So she entered the entrance hall and immediately spotted Dora Mastrantonio’s lifeless body at the foot of the stairs. She cried out, ran to her, found no sign of life and immediately called the police from the phone in the hallway. The ambulance

arrived five minutes later, but the paramedics could not save Mrs Mastrantonio. Then the police came and questioned not only Miss Gomez, but also Mrs Adams, Miss O'Donnell and Dr Jennings, who arrived one by one.

"Finally also the Willow couple. But because they all had a watertight alibi and no traces of violence were found, the investigation was quickly dropped. At the top of the stairs, a crease was found in the carpet. Mrs Mastrantonio probably tripped over it and fell down the stairs."

Pete took off his sunglasses. "Those were the facts."

"Good work, Pete," Jupiter praised. "With this we have a whole lot of information together. But not enough yet. I will ask Inspector Cotta to let me see the police files on this case."

"And you think he will give them to you?" doubted Bob.

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. "I can try. What is certain is that we can't do much with what we know so far. The insights into Dora Mastrantonio's life are all well and good, but as long as we have no idea what really happened on the afternoon of the fifteenth of March, it's of no use to us."

"Good luck persuading Cotta then!" Bob said.

Slowly, The Three Investigators made their way back to the salvage yard, talking about what to do next. But none of them had a really good idea.

The police had already investigated and closed the case—Dora Mastrantonio had been in an accident, not murdered. Why should The Three Investigators come to a different conclusion?

When they finally entered the trailer, the light on the answering machine was flashing. Jupiter listened to the message.

"Hello, you three, this is Bernadette O'Donnell! I'd appreciate it if you'd call me back, I have some news!"

"I'm curious about that," Jupiter said, switched on the loudspeaker, picked up the phone and dialled the number of the Mastrantonio villa.

"They probably want to borrow the Ouija board," Pete murmured. "Then they can ask Dora everything that has always been on their mind."

"Yes please?" Miss O'Donnell spoke up on the other end.

"Hello, Miss O'Donnell, this is Jupiter Jones."

"Jupiter! Nice of you to get back to me so quickly!"

"How is Mrs Adams?"

"Oh, better, much better! She was already discharged this morning. At the moment, she's in one of the guest rooms resting. Actually, she didn't want to come back to this house, but it's certainly better if Cecilia and I can take care of her. Have you made any progress with your investigations?"

"A little. But there are no concrete results yet."

"Well," Miss O'Donnell continued hesitantly, "Cecilia and I have been thinking about something. If it's really true that Dora was murdered—then she would have to know her murderer too, wouldn't she?"

"What are you getting at, Miss O'Donnell?"

"We could try again. And then we'll ask Dora herself who murdered her."

Jupiter cleared his throat. "I hope you realize that the statement made by a ghost with the help of a Ouija board is likely to elicit a weary smile at best from the police."

“Of course. But you could then continue your investigation in a more targeted way, couldn’t you? And to be precise, I didn’t have the Ouija board in mind this time.”

“Oh no?”

“No. Eloise is too unstable for another attempt. We don’t want to put her through that. Instead, we have thought of making direct contact. We’ll let Dora speak for herself—without a board.”

For a moment, the First Investigator was speechless. “And how are you going to do that, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“By recording her voice on tape.”

11. Spirit Voices

“Well, if you ask me, that’s completely ridiculous,” Pete said as they drove towards Malibu Beach. “Recording the voice of a ghost on tape? That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard. How is that supposed to work?”

“Miss O’Donnell will certainly explain that to us,” Jupiter said. “In any case, there is one advantage to this. If we are dealing with a trick, it should be much easier for us to unmask a faked audio recording than a manipulated séance.”

“Oh yeah?” asked Bob. “And how?”

Jupiter grinned knowingly. “You’ll see!”

It was already dark when The Three Investigators reached the Mastrantonio villa. Miss O’Donnell opened the door for them. “I’m glad you could come tonight. Cecilia and I are very excited and anxious to see if it really works. We would have hated to wait until tomorrow.”

“And what about Mrs Adams?” asked Jupiter.

“Well, she’s a little... nervous.”

They went into the living room together. It shone once more in the light of dozens of candles. Mrs Adams and Dr Jennings were not there. The large round table had disappeared, and instead a circle of six chairs had been set up. In the middle, a portable cassette recorder with a microphone connected to it lay on the floor.

“We have already prepared everything,” Miss O’Donnell proudly declared.

Pete frowned at the recording device and finally turned to Miss O’Donnell: “Excuse me, but I’m still not quite clear what you’re actually planning. Are you seriously planning to record Dora’s voice?”

“That’s right.”

“But... how? I mean, she’s dead, isn’t she?”

“She is dead,” Miss O’Donnell confirmed. “But after all, she has already spoken to us twice. It’s just that the Ouija board might not be the best method. So I’ve been reading up on what other ways there are to contact a spirit... and in various books, I came across something fascinating.”

“I’ve checked up on it as well,” Jupiter said. “The recording of spirit voices is known as electronic voice phenomena. There were experiments in which an audio recorder was used to record a séance. During the session, questions were asked to the spirit, very similar to that done with a Ouija board. Apparently no one answered. But when they listened to the recording later, the spirit voice was there.”

“How is that supposed to happen?” asked Pete.

“They say a ghost is often not strong enough to speak directly to people, but its voice energy is enough to be captured on magnetic tape,” Miss O’Donnell explained. “Fascinating recordings have been made in this way.”

“It could all be a trick,” Bob suggested.

“Until a few days ago, I would have agreed with you,” Miss O’Donnell replied. “But since we know that Dora’s spirit wants to talk to us, I no longer think anything is out of the

question.”

Jupiter continued: “Another explanation could be that electronic voice phenomena occur outside the human hearing range—which is typically from about 20 to 20,000 hertz. This means that frequencies outside this range cannot be heard. However, with sensitive microphones, it is possible to pick up and record such frequencies on electronic media.

“It could just be a hiss or crackle on the tape. Then through audio editing, such as noise reduction, filtering, amplification, slowing down, speeding up, or electronic distortion, it may be possible to isolate out and convert such frequencies to make it sound like a human voice. Also, with this procedure, the danger of manipulation is very great.

“The eventual voices could be distorted beyond recognition, which means that you could hardly understand anything. And if you do, it could be with a lot of imagination. In the end, people hear what they want to hear. You can also hear spirit voices from the hiss of a radiator or the hum of a refrigerator if you concentrate on it long enough and believe in it.”

“You may be right, Jupiter,” Miss O’Donnell conceded. “Nevertheless, we should leave no stone unturned to talk to Dora. It is our duty, after all, to find out if she knows her murderer—and who it is.”

“I agree with you on that point,” Jupiter said and nodded. “We will judge the success later.”

The door opened and Dr Jennings and Mrs Adams entered. Mrs Adams looked even worse than the day before. Her skin was pale, her face sunken as if after weeks of illness, and she could only manage a hint of a smile in greeting. Supported by Dr Jennings, she took a seat in the circle of chairs.

“How are you, Mrs Adams?” asked Bob caringly.

“Not good,” she confessed in a broken voice. “I want to leave this house. This ghost madness around Dora... I don’t want it anymore.”

Dr Jennings gave Miss O’Donnell a worried look.

“Maybe we should postpone the experiment,” she suggested. “If Eloise is not well... I don’t want to have to call the ambulance again.”

“But this time it’s different,” Bernadette O’Donnell objected. “You don’t have to do anything, Eloise, except sit here. Maybe it won’t work at all. In any case, there’s nothing to worry about.”

Eloise nodded weakly.

“All right,” Jupiter said. “How is the experiment planned?”

“We sit down in the circle, turn on the recorder, focus our thoughts on Dora and call her. Then we ask questions. After ten minutes, the session ends and we listen to the recording. If it works, her voice will be heard on the tape. At least that’s how I read it in the books.”

“I assume you have checked beforehand that the recorder and the cassette are in perfect working order,” Jupiter said, pointing to the recorder. “After all, we don’t want the experiment to fail because of a technical defect.”

“Of course,” Miss O’Donnell assured him. “Everything works perfectly.”

“Well, Miss O’Donnell, please don’t take it personally, but in the course of our detective career we have had to deal with technical manipulation on a number of occasions. So often, in fact, that I suggest replacing this experimental set-up altogether.”

The First Investigator opened his backpack and took out an audio cassette recorder. He had found it in the salvage yard a few months ago and repaired it. He would have used a mini battery-operated voice recorder that reporters often used, but after several test runs, the old-fashioned recorder had come out on top in terms of sound quality. Another advantage was that one could use normal audio cassettes.

Smiling, he turned to Miss O'Donnell. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not! Even if I don't know who should manipulate something here. But you are the detectives, please, let's use your recorder!"

The First Investigator stepped into the circle of chairs, put the portable recorder aside and replaced it with his recorder. Then he plugged it into the electrical socket and connected the microphone. Jupiter did a short test, then rewound the cassette.

After everyone present took a seat, Jupiter asked: "Everyone ready?" He looked around at all of them and then pressed the record button.

Miss O'Donnell waited until it was very quiet, then she said: "Dora, we're calling you. If you're here, get in touch!"

Nothing happened. But according to Miss O'Donnell's explanation, that did not mean that Dora did not respond. If the spirit did respond, they would only find out after the session.

"You have already contacted us twice. Now we ask you to speak to us."

Silence reigned again. Everyone stared at the recorder as if hypnotized and Pete found himself listening intently. Outside, a car drove by. A woodpecker was hammering against a tree. Nothing could be heard of a spirit voice.

"If you have indeed been killed, then perhaps you know your killer. Please tell us if you know who the killer is, Dora. Tell us who killed you!"

Now Miss O'Donnell paused for a long time. She was obviously hoping for a detailed answer.

Bob sneezed and Pete stifled a yawn. Miss O'Donnell, Dr Jennings and Jupiter stared at the recorder unmoved... There were tears in Mrs Adams's eyes. She cried silently to herself and no one noticed except Pete.

"If you have answered us, Dora, then thank you very much! The culprit will receive his just punishment. We miss you, Dora." Miss O'Donnell heaved a sigh, and then signalled to Jupiter who bent down and turned off the recorder.

The Second Investigator glanced at his watch. The whole meeting had only lasted six minutes. Enough time to say the most important things. But he did not believe that there was anything on the cassette. Absolutely nothing had been heard. How then could a voice have been recorded? He looked over at Bob and Jupiter. There was a clear doubt on their faces as well.

"And now?" asked Jupiter challengingly. "Do we listen to the tape immediately? Or does a spirit voice need a certain manifestation time first?"

"There's plenty of time for mockery if there's nothing on the tape," Miss O'Donnell snapped. "Why don't you rewind it and play it back."

Jupiter picked up the recorder, rewound it and started the playback.

Footsteps and moving chairs could be heard. But the sounds came miserably soft and clattering from the small loudspeakers.

"Well, with this quality, we're guaranteed not to hear Dora's voice, if any," Dr Jennings predicted. "I thought the device was technically flawless."

"It is," Jupiter defended himself. "Only the speakers are not that powerful."

"May I?" asked Dr Jennings, taking the cassette out from the audio recorder. Then she went to the huge Hi-Fi system by the wall and put the cassette into one of the players there. Each component was available in at least duplicate, sometimes even triplicate, so it took a while for Dr Jennings to find the right amplifier input and set everything up.

"This is Dora's equipment. She's technically up to date. If there's anything on the tape, this equipment is guaranteed to get it out."

"Then why didn't we use them for the recording just now?" asked Pete.

“Because it doesn’t have a built-in microphone.”

Cecilia Jennings switched on another device and moved a few sliders up and down.

“And what is that?” Pete wanted to know.

“An equalizer.”

“You can adjust the highs and lows and basses with that,” Bob explained. “A good idea. If Jupiter is right and the spirit voice can only be heard distorted, you can use the equalizer to improve the sound quality.”

“I’m curious about that,” said Pete.

Dr Jennings started the cassette and turned up the volume. After a few seconds, Miss O’Donnell’s voice could be heard clearly. The quality was excellent and after a few adjustments to the tone controls it sounded as if there was a second Bernadette O’Donnell in the room.

“Dora, we’re calling you. If you’re here, get in touch!”

The Three Investigators listened spellbound. Nothing could be heard, only the static that existed on the recording. “You have already contacted us twice. Now we ask you to speak to us.”

Silence again. Then a humming—the sound of the car that had passed outside. The woodpecker was hammering as loud and clear as if it were here in the room. Nothing else. Pete was sure that nothing more would come. The attempt had failed... and he admitted to himself that he was perfectly fine with that. If there really had been a spirit voice, then...

There was something! A bright, plaintive sound that sounded like a combination of crying and singing, vibrating in the air. Dr Jennings turned up the volume. The sound dropped, became deeper and deeper, until a voice could be heard.

It was distorted like a bad radio reception, it sounded squashed, chopped up and tinny, as if someone was talking through the phone to someone else who had put a bucket over his head. But as distorted as the voice was, one could still clearly understand every single word.

The message was short, but it froze everyone present.

“I am here, my dears. Dora is here!”

12. And the Murderer is...

Mrs Adams let out a little scream. She jumped up from her chair and immediately sat down on it again, trembling.

Dr Jennings turned up the volume even higher and pushed the controls in near panic. Bernadette O'Donnell grabbed Bob's upper arm and squeezed it fiercely. Her gaze, however, was fixed on the Hi-Fi speakers, as if she could not only hear but also see Dora's ghost there.

The Three Investigators exchanged alarmed glances. No one knew what to do. A strange spell had settled over everyone present. No one dared speak or move for fear of severing the mysterious link with the realm of the dead. Silence fell again and when Miss O'Donnell's voice was next heard, everyone flinched in shock.

"If you have indeed been killed, then perhaps you know your killer. Please tell us if you know who the killer is, Dora. Tell us who killed you!"

After a few seconds of silence, the spirit voice returned. Again it sounded as if it was descending to earth from a great height, tone by tone the singsong descended to a normal voice. In the middle of it all, Bob's sneeze sounded.

Then Dora's spirit spoke: "My dear friends! I know the answer. I know it... I know it... I know it... The person who killed me... I saw the eyes before I fell... before I died... The killer is close... so close... sooooo close!"

The voice flickered like a candle in a storm and became quieter. For a moment, The Three Investigators feared that contact would break off. But then it stabilized again: "My killer is here... with you... with us... so close!"

The voice dropped, got lower and lower until it was just a muffled hum that became quieter and quieter and finally fell silent.

"If you have answered us, Dora, then thank you very much! The culprit will receive his just punishment. We miss you, Dora."

Miss O'Donnell's sigh sounded, then her footsteps. A loud clacking sound ended the recording. Dr Jennings pressed the stop button and the noise also died away.

For seconds, there was dead silence. Even Jupiter had nothing to say. Everything was spinning in his head. What he had just experienced was absolutely impossible! But they had all heard it! Loud and clear!

"Look!" Pete suddenly shouted and his voice rolled over. He pointed to the window.

Jupiter whirled around and just saw a shadow duck and disappear from their field of vision. "The man who had been watching us before! That was him!"

"After him!" shouted Jupiter, but Bob had already run to the window and pulled it open. With one leap, he was outside.

Bob spread his arms to catch the unknown man but he fell into the void and landed awkwardly on the lawn. He looked around. There was nobody at the flower bed. There was no sign of the stranger. With springy legs and much more athletic than Bob, Pete landed next to him.

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. Gone. I can't even see him anymore."

“Impossible. No one can disappear that quickly. It’s twenty metres to the corner of the house. Even I can’t do that in a second!”

“You can see that nobody is here, Pete!”

“What is it, fellas?” Jupiter called from the window.

“You can stay inside, Jupe,” Bob said. “He got away from us again.”

The First Investigator growled in disappointment and thought for a moment. Finally he said: “Come back inside!”

Pete was about to enter the flower bed to get a better view of the window, but Jupiter held him back.

“Better take the front door!” He pointed to the bed and gave the Second Investigator a warning look. Pete understood. They had agreed not to mention anything about their flour trap to the three ladies.

When Bob and Pete had returned to the living room, Miss O’Donnell exclaimed: “It worked! I knew it! Dora spoke to us, clearly and distinctly!”

“I didn’t find it particularly clear and distinct,” Jupiter objected.

“Are you saying you didn’t understand what she said?” Miss O’Donnell wondered.

“I understood the words very well. The only question is whether they really came from Mrs Mastrantonio.”

“But you heard that!” Dr Jennings cried, outraged. “She said it loud and clear!”

“... Which is not proof,” Jupiter insisted.

“It was her,” Mrs Adams breathed in a trembling voice. “I felt that. She was very close to us!”

“So is her killer,” Miss O’Donnell added and instantly there was silence. The last words of the spirit voice echoed in their minds. The killer was close... to them!

“The man at the window,” Pete broke the silence. “It must be him.”

“But how would Dora have known that we were being watched by him?” asked Bob.

“What do I know!” cried Pete. “She’s a ghost! She probably sees and hears everything! Don’t they always say murderers return to the scene of the crime? That’s the proof, isn’t it! The guy at the window is the culprit!”

“But who is he?” asked Bob. “How do we find out? I don’t understand how he could get away from us again!”

“Slowly, slowly, you two!” admonished Jupiter. “What you recklessly present here as evidence, Pete, is nothing but a string of incoherent assertions. And I would have expected a little more prudence from you too, Bob. We don’t even know if this spirit voice is real.”

“But Jupe, we heard it!” objected Pete. “Didn’t we?”

“Sure...” Jupe murmured.

“And we didn’t hear anything during the recording,” Pete continued. “Do we agree that far?”

“Yes,” Jupiter said impatiently. “I realize that the circumstantial evidence points to the spirit voice. Nevertheless, I’d like to subject the tape to a thorough examination first before we get carried away with anything.” He stepped over to the Hi-Fi system and took out the cassette.

“What do you mean?” asked Miss O’Donnell. “Are you just going to disregard Dora’s words? She almost told us the name of her killer! You must be investigating that!”

“Not until we have proof of the authenticity of this recording,” Jupiter decided. “And to be honest, I still don’t believe it.”

“How much more evidence do you need, Jupiter Jones?” hissed Miss O’Donnell. “I want you to find Dora’s killer instead of wasting your time with this recording.”

“Miss O’Donnell, if Dora Mastrantonio was really murdered, the case is out of our league anyway. As soon as we have proof of this, we will hand the matter over to the police.”

“If it’s not too late by then,” Miss O’Donnell hissed. “The murderer could be long gone by then...”

“Could it be the man at the window?” asked Bob.

“That could be. But Dora didn’t say that her killer was at the window. She said the killer was very close. So it doesn’t necessarily have to be the stranger.” Miss O’Donnell glanced around and lowered her voice.

They could clearly hear how difficult her next words were: “It could have been one of us.”

13. Dora or not Dora?

“I saw the eyes before I fell... before I died... The killer is close... so close... sooooo close!”

Jupiter stopped the tape, let it rewind and played the recording again.

“I really don’t know what else you expect to get out of this, Jupe,” grumbled Pete, who was sitting next to him in the trailer. “We’ve listened to the recording at least five times.”

“Six times,” Bob corrected.

“And then every sentence of Dora’s again, one by one,” Pete continued. “What else do you think you’ll find?”

Jupiter shook his head without taking his eyes off the device. “I don’t know. But there must be something on this tape that tells us how this recording came about.”

“And if... well... if you just accept that it really was Dora’s ghost?” Pete asked timidly.

“Come on, Pete, how many times do I have to tell you? This is absolutely ridiculous!”

“But the phenomenon of spirit voices really exists,” Bob interjected. “There are even books about it...”

“So what?” Jupe argued. “There are also books that say that the Egyptian pyramids were built by aliens. We can’t prove that! There must be a trick behind the voice!”

“But how?” asked Pete indignantly. “We all heard nothing! And yet there is something on the tape! The recording device was not tampered with! Where’s the trick in that?”

“I don’t know!” cried Jupiter angrily. “And I’m certainly not going to figure it out if you keep bugging me!”

He let the tape continue and then repeated the next bit of the spirit voice over and over again: “My killer is here... with you... with us... so close!”

“What do you actually think of Miss O’Donnell’s reaction to that sentence?” asked Bob after a while.

“You mean that one of them could be the killer?” asked Pete. “Quite daring. Dr Jennings and Mrs Adams looked at her like she was out of her mind. Anyway, the mood was depressing after that.”

“Nevertheless, I don’t think the speculation is that far-fetched,” Jupiter said and finally switched off the tape.

“Excuse me? You mean that one of the three is really guilty?” Pete asked.

“Let’s approach this logically,” the First Investigator decided. “The fact is... the spirit voice is a clue. And for one of the people present—for us, for Miss O’Donnell, Mrs Adams or Dr Jennings, maybe even for all of us together, whoever arranged for the spirit voice to come on the tape—even if it was a ghost—was trying to tell us something. The killer is near. And that really only leaves four people—the three ladies of the house and the stranger at the window. Because one thing I know for sure is that the three of us didn’t do it.”

“But why the guesswork?” asked Bob. “Why didn’t the spirit voice give the name straight away?”

“I don’t know,” Jupiter confessed. “The more I look at the matter, I can picture the next investigative steps. First, we have to find out who the stranger at the window is. With a bit of luck, we’ll be able to follow his flour trail tomorrow in daylight.

“Secondly, we take a closer look at our three ladies. For example, I would love to look around the Mastrantonio villa without being watched at every turn by anyone of the three ladies. Thirdly, we must somehow find out who or what is behind the spirit voice. I admit, this is a very tricky puzzle. But maybe there is a way to technically equalize the recording and reconstruct the original voice.”

“I know who can help us with that!” Bob blurted out. “Darren Higman! The Mastrantonio fan I visited! He does this kind of thing professionally and also has excellent hearing.”

“Excellent, Bob. We’ll go and see him first thing tomorrow. I won’t believe it if we couldn’t solve the mystery of the spirit voice!”

The next day, the beautiful weather was over. It had become stormy and the wind was driving thick clouds together. It was getting darker on the way to Santa Monica.

Darren Higman was delighted to hear from Bob once more. And very surprised when he appeared at the door after school, accompanied by Jupiter and Pete. Higman invited the three of them in, offered them something to drink and led them into his combination of living room and recording studio.

“What can I do for you?” he finally asked. “Do you need more information about Dora Mastrantonio?”

“In a way,” Bob answered hesitantly. “But actually it’s about something else. We have a tape—a recording of a distorted voice. We ask ourselves whether it is possible to make the voice audible again as it originally was.”

“Hmm...” Higman mumbled. “This kind of thing is usually not easy. It depends on what means were used to alienate the voice. If there were only one or two electronic distortion devices at work, I might manage to undo them... but if it goes beyond that, it’s almost impossible. I’d have to hear the recording. Do you have the tape with you?” He held out his hand.

“Yes,” said Bob. “It’s only—”

—The content of what was said might seem a little strange,” Jupiter interrupted. “We ask you not to attach too much importance to it.”

Darren Higman laughed. “Nothing can shock me that easily.”

“I hope so,” Jupiter replied.

Jupiter handed him the tape and Mr Higman went to his equipment to put it in. With fumbling fingers, he switched it on and turned up the volume. The six-minute recording ran through without anyone speaking.

But The Three Investigators could observe how the colour slowly drained from Higman’s face and he listened stiffly with his mouth open.

“You’re not serious!” he said, laughing uncertainly. “Am I on *Candid Camera* or something? That would be really mean, because with me you wouldn’t even have to hide the camera. What’s going on?”

“The tape is real,” Jupiter explained. “The woman you heard speaking is Bernadette O’Donnell, an old friend of Dora Mastrantonio. The spirit voice, on the other hand... well, we were hoping you could tell us who was speaking. That’s why we came to you.”

“But this didn’t really happen, did it?” Higman exclaimed. “This... this is about summoning spirits! It actually took place? When? Why? With whom? Excuse me, but if I’m going to help you, I’d like to know the background. This is just unbelievable!”

The Three Investigators exchanged questioning looks. Finally Jupiter nodded to Bob to tell Darren Higman the details of the case. Higman could not help but be amazed.

"Jupiter doesn't think it's really Dora's ghost talking there," Bob concluded his report. "So my thought was to get an expert's opinion and present the tape to you."

"I have to listen to it again!" Darren Higman said and rewound the cassette. He looked nervous. Nevertheless, The Three Investigators could see that he had caught fire.

"You know, that's about the most incredible story I've ever heard," Higman said. "But if I can help you solve the case, of course I'll be happy to... if only so as not to jeopardize Mrs Mastrantonio's memory. The idea that her ghost is really haunting her villa is horrifying!"

Higman started the tape and listened. Then he switched on his computer and started some programs. He did not use a mouse for this, but only the keyboard. There was also no screen, instead a voice output read out the commands for him. He rarely used this help, however, as he knew most of it by heart. It was fascinating to watch him work. When the program was activated, he ran the recording a third time.

"I'm digitizing the recording now, so I can edit it better," Higman explained. "I'll be able to do most of it with my mixers and knobs, and the rest with the keyboard. I've had the computer's sound and music programs set up so that I can do without the monitor and mouse completely. Mouse arrows are a real horror for blind users!"

After a few minutes, the spirit voice was isolated from the rest of the recording and was now played back in a continuous loop. Then Higman began to experiment with the voice. He moved sliders or pressed some keys to change the audio output settings. The voice was adjusted softer or louder, faster or slower. Sometimes it approached a normal human voice, then suddenly it was changed to sound ice-cold electronic or velvety soft like the purr of a cat.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob followed Higman's work in amazement.

The blind man's fingers virtually flew over his desk and listened intensely to the spirit voice again and again. Eventually, the hiss and tinny sound were largely eliminated, but the voice still sounded strangely alien.

"I'm sorry, that's the best I can do," sighed Mr Higman.

"That's already significant progress!" said Jupiter enthusiastically. "I am very impressed!"

"Thank you," Higman said. "Do you recognize the voice now?"

"Recognize?" asked Bob. "No. Should we?"

Darren Higman shrugged his shoulders. "It could have been. You know, I have several hundred recordings of Dora Mastrantonio—live recordings, studio recordings, but also radio and television interviews—in fact, anything you can get. In addition, I hear more than sighted people anyway. What is a face for you is a voice for me. A voice reveals a lot about a person. And I probably know Dora Mastrantonio's voice better than anyone else."

"What does that mean?" asked Pete tensely. "Is it Dora on the tape or not?"

"The recording has been heavily alienated—very much," Higman said. "But still, the characteristic of a voice, the resonance, cannot be completely eradicated in this way. That's why I can say one thing with absolute certainty..."

"Whoever was speaking, it wasn't Dora Mastrantonio."

14. The Will

“Are you really absolutely sure?” Jupiter asked.

“Yes.”

Jupiter slapped his thigh with the flat of his hand. “I knew it! Nothing but a trick! Mr Higman, would you repeat that statement in front of witnesses? For example, in front of Mrs Mastrantonio’s friends?”

“Of course. I can’t prove it, of course, but I think that even less aurally gifted Mastrantonio connoisseurs would agree with me at any time.”

“Mr Higman, we thank you!” said Jupiter. “You have been an invaluable help! We have to say goodbye now, though. We have another important appointment!”

“Oh, yeah?” asked Pete. “I don’t know anything about that.”

“We have to go to the villa again,” the First Investigator explained. “I spoke to Miss O’Donnell on the phone this morning and found out that no one would be home there this afternoon. Her outrageous suspicions last night caused a tremendous ruckus after we left. So today all the ladies went their separate ways. The usual—shopping, hairdressing and so on. They’ll be back in the evening, so we don’t have much time.”

“But why should we go to the villa if no one is there?” asked Pete uncomprehendingly.

“Precisely because there is no one there, Pete!”

This time, The Three Investigators stayed on the other side of the Mastrantonio villa. This way they did not run the risk of being discovered by the nosy Mrs Willow.

They were late. No one knew exactly when the occupants of the house would be back. The clouds had gathered into a dense, leaden grey mass and darkened the sky even more. It could start raining at any moment.

“And how do we get in there now?” asked Pete.

“I was actually completely counting on you for that question,” Jupiter confessed. “After all, there’s no door you can’t open with your lock picks.”

“Only for normal locks,” Pete clarified. “But this is a villa! I’d be surprised if there were no security locks here.”

Pete crept up to the door and confirmed that it was indeed a security lock that he would not bother to try to pick.

“There is another possibility, of course,” Bob said and pointed upstairs. There was a window open on the first floor. It had bars on it, though. “Do you think you’ll fit through there?”

“Me?” echoed Pete. “Why is it always me?”

“Because you’re the slimmest of us,” Bob said.

“I wouldn’t be so sure, Bob. You’re shorter and narrower than me. How about you try it for a change?”

“But I’ll never get up there in my life.”

The Second Investigator grinned. “We’ll see about that!”

Three minutes later, Bob stood on Pete’s shoulder with trembling legs. Pete held his ankles and swayed precariously under Bob’s weight. Jupiter stood guard at the corner, but

kept casting a worried glance at his friends.

“You’re too far from the wall, Pete!” hissed Bob. “I’ll never get to the window like that!”

“If you could stand upright, I’d take a step forward too!”

“How can I when you wobble like that!”

Pete took a small step and immediately Bob began to stagger. He rowed his arms, fell forward and just managed to hold on to the wrought-iron grating.

“What are you doing!” murmured Jupiter.

“You just keep a lookout for us!” Bob hissed.

But Jupiter could not hold on to himself. He snorted. “Now I remember why this is usually Pete’s job. You look really silly, Bob!”

“We’re happy to swap!” Pete quipped.

He rushed to the aid of Bob and, with a tremendous effort, lifted him high enough for Bob to get a firm grip on the bars with both feet. The iron bars were indeed far enough apart for him to squeeze through. A few moments later, Bob was inside the villa.

Since none of the investigators had been upstairs before, it took Bob a moment to get his bearings. He was in a bedroom. It was very soberly furnished, with unpacked boxes in the corners. There were framed photos on a chest of drawers.

In some, Cecilia Jennings was seen with a dark-haired, handsome man—her late husband, as a wedding photo proved.

Bob tore his gaze away and hurried into the hallway and from there down the stairs to the front door. He found that the lock was operated by thumb-turn from the inside, so he could open the door easily.

Pete and Jupiter were already waiting on the other side. “How did I do?”

“Not bad, Bob.”

“Come on, I really wasn’t that bad!”

“Nope,” Pete said, “but you looked like a wet sack on the clothesline, but otherwise it was okay.”

Jupiter and Pete entered the villa and Bob closed the door behind them.

“All right, we’re in,” Pete stated. “And now what? What are we looking for, Juve?”

“I don’t know. Everything. Let’s try to find out something about the three ladies. What do they do? What did they do before? How good was their relationship with Dora really? Look for papers that give information about their financial situation and personal things. You know, everything. It’s best if we split up. I’ll take the ground floor first, you two go upstairs!”

Downstairs was the kitchen, a bathroom, the dining room and the living room, which The Three Investigators already knew. There was also the entrance hall with the staircase and a small pantry.

It was already quite dark, but Jupiter didn’t dare turn on the lights. There were still moving boxes scattered here and there. Jupiter carefully opened one after the other, but all he found were books and crockery. The rest of the floor was also absolutely ordinary and inconspicuous.

After only ten minutes, Jupiter had no idea where else to look. He stood helplessly in front of the music system, which cost tens of thousands of dollars and could even reproduce spirit voices in crystal-clear sound. But Dora had been a singer and music lover. There was nothing unusual about this system, however strange it might seem at first in the midst of the old-fashioned furniture.

Jupiter let his gaze wander over the countless control panels and displays, over the CD player, the two tape decks with the microphone... Jupiter was puzzled. Why was there a microphone connected here? Hadn’t Dr Jennings said there wasn’t one?

The First Investigator flinched. Pete had approached him silently from behind. “Jupe, come here, Bob has found something!”

“Do you have to scare me like that! Look what I just discovered!”

“Whatever it is, it’s not as spectacular as Bob’s discovery!” The Second Investigator grabbed Jupiter by the arm and dragged him upstairs.

Bob was standing in Mrs Mastrantonio’s study, holding a stack of papers, the top of which he was studying carefully. When Jupiter entered the room, he held it under his nose. “I found this in the desk drawer. It was locked. But that was no problem for Pete, of course.”

“What’s that?” Jupe asked.

“A bombshell! Read for yourself!”

Jupiter looked at the paper. It was written in black ink in a beautifully curved handwriting. He read the text. Then he read it again... and again... and finally, he said: “A will.”

“A change in the will,” Bob corrected him. “From Dora Mastrantonio. It was right at the top of the pile.”

“By this writing she decrees that in the event of her death the villa shall not pass into the possession of Eloise Adams as originally planned, but that Bernadette O’Donnell shall inherit everything! That’s just—”

“A bombshell! That’s what I’m saying.”

“So that means the villa doesn’t belong to Mrs Adams at all,” Pete said. “It’s Miss O’Donnell’s!”

Jupiter frowned without taking his eyes off the paper. Then he shook his head slowly. “No, it doesn’t mean that. It was planned that way by Dora, yes. But this is merely a draft, not a final will. It is handwritten, bears no signature from a notary and has no stamp. I am not sure if it is legally valid. I’m sure the valid will was kept by the notary... and in that one, Mrs Adams is the heiress.”

“And what does that mean now?” asked Pete.

“It means that Dora intended to change her will and make Miss O’Donnell her heir... Look at the date! Dora wrote this draft only a few days before her death. Presumably she intended to take it to her notary and have the change made. But obviously this never happened, because in the end, Mrs Adams remained the heiress. And why?”

For a moment, no one spoke a word.

“Because she was killed before the change!” whispered Pete, horrified. “But that means that—”

“—That at last there was someone who would have had a motive to kill Mrs Mastrantonio,” Jupe surmised. “Someone who wanted to prevent this change in the will from taking effect.”

“Eloise Adams,” Bob said.

Suddenly, a flash of lightning illuminated the room. The Three Investigators flinched.

“Now the thunderstorm is starting,” Pete remarked.

But Jupiter shook his head. “That’s not a thunderstorm! Someone was taking photos of us! From outside!”

The First Investigator hurried to the window, but Bob held him back at the last moment and pulled him into a blind corner of the room so that could not be seen from the window.

“Are you crazy?” Bob asked. “If there really is someone out there who can see us here, we’ll be in deep trouble! We broke in here, Jupe, remember?”

Jupiter tore himself away angrily. “Quite obviously we have already been seen, or how do you explain the flash? I want to know who took the photo!”

He cautiously pushed himself up to the window and risked a look outside. From here he could overlook part of the rose garden, the street and the Willows' house. The rain-heavy clouds were now almost black.

"Nobody to be seen. That is... Wait a minute!"

A car drove along the road, slowed down and finally stopped in front of the property. The door was opened and the driver got out.

"Fellas!" shouted Jupiter. "We have to get out of here! Now!"

"What's wrong?" asked Pete anxiously.

"Dr Jennings! She's coming back!"

15. Day of Discoveries

“Oh, no!” cried Pete. “What are we going to do? She mustn’t see us here!”

“That’s what I said, let’s go!” Jupiter instructed. “Bob, we’ll take the papers with us!”

Bob stuffed the stack into his backpack. In no time at all, The Three Investigators had left the study and were on their way down the stairs. But there was already a key rattling in the lock.

“Too late!” hissed Pete. “What now?”

“Through the window!” Jupe said.

They turned around, went back up the stairs and slipped into Dr Jennings’s bedroom.

Not a second too soon, because no sooner had Bob entered the room than the front door opened and Dr Jennings came in, armed with big shopping bags. Bob watched her through the crack in the door. If she went into the living room, they could dare to escape through the front door.

But she did not go into the living room. She headed straight for the stairs.

“She’s coming up!” murmured Bob. “We have to go!”

Pete was already at the window. The bars were narrow and for a moment he feared getting stuck in the middle. But then he squeezed through with all his might and jumped down into the garden.

Then it was Bob’s turn. He had no trouble getting past the bars and was down even faster.

“Now you, Jupe!” murmured Bob. But the First Investigator did not move. “Jupe?”

“You jokers!” he finally hissed. “Can you tell me how I’m supposed to do this? I’m not quite as slim as you, remember?” Jupiter tried putting his arm through the bars, but it didn’t work at the shoulder. It was no use.

“Hide!” shouted Pete.

Footsteps were already approaching the door. Jupiter had no choice. He threw himself on the floor and rolled under the bed at the last second.

The door opened and Dr Jennings came in, threw the shopping bags on the bed and dropped onto a chair in the corner, sighing. Jupiter pulled his legs up so as not to be discovered.

Dr Jennings remained sitting motionless for a minute, then she lifted herself up again and left the room. Jupiter pricked up his ears. Water was rushing somewhere, probably Dr Jennings was in the bathroom. It’s now or never!

He crawled out from under the bed, got up and crept into the hallway. No one was to be seen. As quietly as possible, he ran down the stairs, silently opened the door and left the villa unnoticed.

“Shh! Jupe! Here!” Bob whispered. He and Pete were crouching behind a wooden bench in the garden. It was so thickly overgrown with roses that the two investigators could hardly be seen.

Jupiter joined them in the hiding place. “That went well just in time. I really thought we’d have a little more time to search the house.”

“We seem to have found the most important things,” Bob remarked, patting his backpack. “Now let’s get out of here!”

“Wait a minute!” admonished Jupiter. “Have you already forgotten the second job we have to do? The track of the unknown man at the window! It could start raining any second and the trail will be ruined.”

“If there is one,” Bob added.

“Dr Jennings is on the top floor,” Jupe said. “If we sneak along the wall of the house, she won’t see us! Come on, let’s go before the other ladies show up here too!”

They left their cover and circled the villa until they were under the living room windows on the other side. The daylight was just enough to inspect the flower bed. The flour trail was not very pronounced, but still clearly visible.

“It worked, Jupe!” exclaimed Pete excitedly.

“Shh!” Bob went. “If you keep shouting like that, Dr Jennings will hear us after all.”

“It worked, indeed,” Jupe agreed. “The stranger stepped into the flour stain while watching us through the window and carried the trail on. Now the only question is—how far and where?”

A first drop of rain fell on Jupiter’s nose. The rain quickly became heavier. Now they had no time to lose. The Three Investigators bent lower over the lawn and followed the trail of flour a little way along the wall of the house and finally to the hedge that separated the rose garden from the Willows’ property. There it disappeared in the middle of the thorny undergrowth.

“How am I supposed to understand that?” asked Pete. “The stranger disappeared into the hedge?” He looked up. “He could hardly have jumped over it, it’s much too high for that.”

Jupiter examined the hedge more closely. It was undoubtedly just as dense at this point as everywhere else. But despite this, something was different. The First Investigator felt the leaves, the ground, the trunk—and suddenly had a piece of hedge in his hand.

“What’s that?” asked Bob, irritated. “Is the hedge artificial?”

Jupiter looked more closely at the small shrub in his hand and the hole that had appeared. “No, not artificial. But someone has cut a hole in it and then closed it up again with an offshoot. It’s not noticeable at all, but you can take out the offshoot together with its root at any time.”

“Ingeniously simple,” Pete thought. “So the stranger disappeared through this hole at our first séance. We didn’t see that in the darkness.”

“Now the only question is where the hole leads to,” Jupiter said.

“Well, to the Willows’ garden,” said Bob.

“You sure?” The First Investigator got down on all fours and began to crawl through the opening in the hedge. But instead of the neatly cut lawn on the neighbouring property, a wooden wall awaited him. He knocked on it. It sounded hollow, the wall was not very thick. Jupiter pushed against it and it gave way, swinging upwards on a hinge.

“That’s what I thought!” Jupiter muttered and crawled on, into the middle of almost absolute darkness. Only very dim grey light filtered through a tiny dirty window.

He stood up and waited until Bob and Pete had followed him. “Does anyone have a light?”

A moment later, Bob switched on his flashlight and The Three Investigators realized where they were.

“It’s a garden shed!” Pete observed when he saw the lawn mower in the corner, the small workbench and the garden tools on the walls.

“Quick to spot,” Jupiter said. “John Willow’s garden shed, which borders directly on the hedge. Obviously someone has built a small secret door into the wall to gain unnoticed access to his dear neighbours’ property at any time. Fellas, today is the day of unexpected discoveries!”

Jupiter bent down, closed the gap in the hedge and folded the secret door shut. It was as good as invisible from this side.

The Three Investigators looked around as the rain pounded harder and harder on the wooden roof above their heads. There were old flower pots on a shelf. Bob lifted a few of them. Through the smudged pane of the small window one could see the Willows’ house. A light was shining there.

“Apart from the secret door, however, I don’t see anything else unusual here,” Pete noted after a while. “It’s a garden shed, nothing more.”

“Lights out!” Jupiter hissed suddenly and Bob instantly turn off the flashlight. “Something’s happening out there!”

The Three Investigators crowded around the window and looked out. The front door had opened and Mrs Willow stepped out into the pouring rain.

“Come on, John, or are you going to wait until I’m soaked?” nagged Mrs Willow. To protect herself from the nasty weather, she wore a flowered plastic headscarf and hunched her shoulders.

“Go to the car now!” came Mr Willow’s unnerved voice from the house.

Mrs Willow hurried and got into their car. Shortly afterwards, her husband also left the house, pulled the door shut and went into the rain. He too wore protection against the wet—a shiny black mackintosh!

16. In the Basement of the Suspect

“Look!” whispered Pete excitedly. “The mackintosh! Exactly the same one was worn by the unknown man at the window!”

“John Willow,” Jupiter said. “So it really was him, then.”

The Three Investigators watched Mr Willow get into a car in which his wife had already taken a seat. Then the car was started and they drove off.

“Now the only question is what Mr Willow was doing over at the villa,” the First Investigator said.

“Maybe he was just curious,” Bob mused.

“Like his wife? I don’t think so,” Jupiter said. “I suspect that he might have something to do with the spirit voices. Don’t ask me in what way—but we might find out since we’re here...”

Jupiter opened the door to the outside. Icy rain whipped in.

“What are you up to, Jupe?” asked Bob.

“I thought that was clear. We’ll have a look around at Mr and Mrs Willow’s place.”

“But Jupe!” Pete revolted.

“Come on, such a favourable opportunity will never come again!” Jupe insisted.

“I don’t know,” muttered the Second Investigator. “Don’t you think that’s going too far? Snooping around the villa is one thing. After all, there are strange things going on over there and we’re investigating this case. But what have the Willows got to do with it?”

“Mr Willow stood at the window twice and watched us,” Jupiter reminded them. “Isn’t that reason enough for us to investigate?”

“What if it was just a coincidence?” asked Pete timidly.

“Coincidence?” echoed Jupiter. “How often do you happen to stand in front of your neighbours’ windows, Pete? No, it wasn’t a coincidence. Mr Willow has something to do with this... and we have an opportunity right now to solve the mystery. We shouldn’t let it go to waste.”

The First Investigator did not wait for an answer and stepped out into the storm. Ducking, he hurried to the covered entrance of the house, which, however, offered little protection from the rain. Pete followed him reluctantly.

“Come on, Pete, get to work! I guess this isn’t a safety lock, is it? But hurry up, we don’t want to leave puddles in the house. Where’s Bob?”

“I don’t know. He was looking for something, I think,” Pete said as he inspected the lock.

Bob arrived a few moments later. He grinned broadly. “Forget your lock picks, Pete, I have something better!” He opened his fist.

“A key? Where did you get that?” Pete asked.

“It was in the shed under one of the flower pots. I bet it’s the spare key for the front door.”

“And how did you know about this?” Pete probed further.

“Everyone has a spare key deposited somewhere. Either under the doormat or in the gutter or in a flower pot. That’s common knowledge!”

Confident of success, Bob tried the key—but it didn’t fit.

“Common knowledge, huh?” sneered Pete. “I don’t think that was anything, Bob! We’ll have to call in an expert!” He pulled out his small black case in which he kept his lock picks and immediately set to work.

In less than a minute, the door was open. “Kids’ stuff.”

“If we didn’t have you, Pete,” Jupiter remarked.

“You said it, Jupe.”

The Three Investigators entered the Willows’ house. Here, too, they did not turn on any lights for fear of being discovered. At first, they moved forward by the light of Bob’s flashlight. He covered the beam of light with his hand and in this dim glow they explored the house.

It was much smaller than the Mastrantonio villa and basically only consisted of a kitchen, bathroom, living room and bedroom. Every room was equally hideously furnished and after only five minutes, it was hard for The Three Investigators to imagine that there was any secret hiding in this house.

“Let’s just forget it,” Pete suggested. “We won’t find anything more here.”

Bob nodded. “I think so too... unless there’s a hidden treasure map pattern worked into the crocheted doilies or something, but I doubt it. The Willows are as plain and boring as their house. There’s no mystery there. Come on, Jupe, let’s go.”

The First Investigator made a face. He could not contradict his friends as he did not believe that they would find anything either. Still, it was unexpected for him to give up so quickly.

“The basement!” it occurred to him. “We haven’t been to the basement yet!”

Pete frowned. “Do you think we’ll find something there other than the heating system?”

“We’ll see. And if it’s just for the sake of completeness, we have to go to the basement.”

The stone staircase was steep, damp stains shone on the walls. A bare light bulb dangled under the ceiling, but it was so dim that it seemed to cast more shadows than light. There were three wooden doors. Behind the first was a storage room for canned food and with a freezer. Behind the second was the expected heating system. The third door was locked.

“I think there’s something immensely appealing about locked doors for a detective,” Jupiter said. “Pete? What do you think? Kids’ stuff again?”

Pete bent over the lock, but that was when Bob approached and waved the key from the garden shed. “It’s unlikely, but...”

“Try it!” Jupiter urged him and Bob put the key in the lock.

It fitted. And it could be turned around. The lock gave way with a click.

“If someone hides the key to a basement room in a garden shed—” Bob pondered.

“—Then whatever is in that room is probably not for everyone,” Jupiter finished the sentence. Then he pushed down the handle and the door swung open. Bob shone his flashlight to locate the light switch and then turned it on.

The Three Investigators could not believe what they saw. Dumb with shock, they stood in the small basement room and let their eyes wander over the walls and the altar-like table.

It was everything about Dora Mastrantonio, as far as their eyes could see. The walls were papered with photos and newspaper cuttings of the opera singer in all sizes. In the corner was a small shelf containing a good dozen Mastrantonio CDs and a portable CD player.

Framed on the table were some photos, most of them self-taken snapshots, of Dora Mastrantonio in her rose garden or in her house. Some photos also showed Eloise Adams, a few with Miss O’Donnell and Dr Jennings, and some with people whom The Three Investigators did not know. The prints had the date and exact time superimposed in the lower

right corner, as could be done with some automatic cameras. According to the dates, the photos had been taken over the course of several years.

"My goodness!" Pete finally gasped. "Look at this!"

"Mr Willow seems to be a great Mastrantonio admirer," Jupiter stated. "I strongly suspect that this is his room and not that of his wife. She probably doesn't know what's in here."

"Admirer?" Pete laughed bitterly. "That's a shameless understatement, Jupe. Look around you! He's obsessed with her! He took all the photos himself! He took photos through different windows into the house. Do you think... do you think he took photos of us too? Earlier in the study, I mean, when there was a sudden flash."

"Very likely yes," Jupiter said. "I didn't see anyone outside. But did you notice that from the Willows' bedroom window you can see right into the Mastrantonio villa? Probably he took the photo from there—like so many others. Look here, Dora in her bathrobe."

"And here she is making out with a guy," Bob said, tapping one of the framed pictures. "Hey, wait a minute, I know that guy!"

"What are you saying?" Jupe said.

"Sure, I've seen him before. Just about an hour ago in another photo in Dr Jennings's bedroom. That's Cecilia Jennings's husband, Gilbert!"

"You're not serious!" shouted Jupiter.

"Yes, he is! The face is unmistakable. I saw their wedding photo, so it must have been her husband. He died only recently, didn't he?"

"Four months ago," Jupiter said. "A week before Dora died. Well, well, so the two of them had an affair. Dora really didn't miss a beat. First she makes a move on Eloise's husband, then Cecilia's. If Bernadette had been married, Dora would probably have snagged her husband too. I wonder if it's a coincidence that Gilbert and Dora died so soon after each other."

"No," Pete said in a grave voice and suddenly a cold shiver ran through his body. "Don't you see what this is? And what this means?"

"What do you mean?" Bob asked.

"Mr Willow is not just a Mastrantonio fan. He was crazy about her! He secretly took hundreds of photos of her! And not only that, he's obsessed with her even beyond her death, taking photos of everything going on in her villa months later. That's not normal! And I guarantee his wife has no idea about it, otherwise the key to this room wouldn't have been so well hidden."

"What are you getting at, Pete?" Jupe asked.

"It's quite logical. John Willow probably had a secret crush on Dora. Of course, he has no chance at all with the diva, so he idolizes her from afar. In the process, he discovers one day that Dora is having an affair with Cecilia's husband. Mr Willow goes completely mad with jealousy and kills Gilbert Jennings first and a week later, Dora Mastrantonio. Remember what Dora's spirit voice said? The killer is near! And a second later, I see Mr Willow standing at the window. It all fits!"

Pete had turned pale. Suddenly he was freezing cold. "We have to leave immediately, Jupe, I'm not staying here a minute longer! We'll call the police!"

"Take it easy, Pete, don't panic!"

"Don't panic?"

Pete's voice cracked. "You said yourself that a murder case is out of our league. You can multiply the whole thing by two now, because it's even a double murder! And we're in the murderer's basement!"

Jupiter rolled his eyes. “My goodness, Pete, take it easy! It’s a fascinating theory, but we don’t have the slightest proof. And besides, you’re forgetting some facts, for example, the spirit voice wasn’t real, we know that by now.”

“Oh, nonsense! Just because Mr Higman said it wasn’t Dora’s voice? Of course it’s not Dora’s voice, it’s the voice of her ghost! Voices just change when you cross over into the afterlife!”

“And what about the changing of the will?” Jupe asked.

“What do I know about it?” Pete exclaimed. “Coincidence! I don’t care either! I want to get out of here as soon as possible!”

“Jupe, I’d be in favour of us leaving too,” Bob spoke up. “We don’t know when Mr Willow will be back. And after all, Pete might be right. If Willow catches us here, then—”

“All right, all right, we’ll get out of here,” Jupiter relented. “After all, we have seen enough.”

They turned to leave, but suddenly Bob stopped. His gaze was fixed on a small photo that hung inconspicuously on the wall next to the door. Eloise Adams was clearly visible in the foreground.

“Look at this! This photo here! It was taken from the Willows’ bedroom. Mrs Adams is standing in the study. She seems quite angry and is shouting through the open door at Dora Mastrantonio, who is standing in the hallway.”

Pete glanced at the photo. “So what? Best friends fight sometimes.”

“That’s not what I mean, Pete. But—” Bob began.

“The date!” Jupiter interrupted him and took the photo from the wall to examine the printed date more closely. “No way!”

“What, Jupe?” Pete asked.

This time it was Bob who answered: “Eloise Adams had an alibi for the day Dora died. She claimed not to have even been in Malibu Beach when Dora died. But this photo was taken on that very day. And it was taken at exactly 3:48 pm—twelve minutes before the cleaning lady came and discovered Dora’s body!”

17. Lack of Evidence

The rain was pounding alarmingly loud on the roof of Headquarters. A damp patch formed in one spot in the ceiling. There it dripped slowly but steadily into a pail below.

Pete rubbed his hair dry with a towel while Bob and Jupiter were busy hanging their wet clothes over a clothesline that was stretched criss-cross through the trailer. On the way from Malibu to Rocky Beach they had got completely soaked. Bob had already put on some tea to combat the cold that had crept under their skin.

"I don't even know what to think anymore," Pete said, peeking out from under the towel. "First it looks like Mrs Adams is the culprit because she's the only one with a motive. Then it turns out that Mr Willow is a completely deranged Mastrantonio fanatic and would make a pretty good psycho killer. And now it's Mrs Adams again, because she was in the villa at the time of the murder, although she had claimed the opposite. And on top of that, she had an argument with Dora a few minutes before she died. But if she's after the inheritance—why is she refusing to move into the house now?"

"That's the big question," Jupiter admitted. "In any case, the suspicion that Eloise Adams lied is growing stronger, which is why we should keep her in focus as the main suspect for the time being."

"I would say it's not just suspicion, it's proof," Bob objected. "She is quite clearly recognizable in the photo—so she must have lied."

"You forget, however, that the date on the photo can also be wrong because the camera was set wrongly," Jupiter said. "I think that's unlikely, but we can't ignore any possibility."

"And what do we do now?" Pete wanted to know. "Shouldn't we tell Inspector Cotta? After all, the suspicion is growing that it really was murder, isn't it?"

"Without proof, we don't tell anyone," Jupiter replied firmly. "And unfortunately we are still missing a lot of information... but that could change as early as tonight."

"How?" asked Bob.

"I spoke to Cotta on the phone yesterday. It was a tough job, but he promised to find the police report on the Mastrantonio case and fax it to us. It should arrive soon. Until then, we should try to develop a conclusive theory based on the new facts."

The tea was ready and Bob distributed the cups. The Three Investigators warmed their hands with it and drank sip by sip.

"Let's start by the changing of the will," Jupiter suggested. "Bob, show us the papers again!"

Bob pulled the stack out of his backpack, which had fortunately withstood the rain, and handed it to Jupiter.

"So Dora Mastrantonio intended to bequeath the villa to Bernadette and not to Eloise, as originally intended. The all-important question is—did Eloise know about this? If so, then she had a motive to kill Dora before she went to the notary with the change. But wouldn't Eloise then also logically have destroyed the draft amendment?"

"Maybe she didn't know there was one," Bob suggested. "Dora might have told her that she had disinherited her. As a result, Eloise kills Dora, unaware that the change in the will is already in writing as a draft."

"That's a possibility," Jupiter agreed. "Still, I think she must have at least suspected it and looked for it. In fact, it wasn't particularly hard to find. The document was in a locked desk drawer with the other papers."

Jupiter leafed through the rest of the papers. "If I were here, that would have been the first place I would have looked... and picking the simple lock should be easy even for—" The First Investigator paused. He looked at the stack of papers in his hands.

"What is it, Jupe?" asked Pete.

"We were in Dora's study, weren't we?"

"Yes."

"Then why are Bernadette's papers on her desk?"

"Excuse me?" asked Bob, glancing at the papers. "Bernadette's papers?"

"Yes. Bank statements, insurance policies, letters from the authorities—this whole pile here belongs to Bernadette, not Dora!"

"What do you mean, Jupe?" Bob asked.

"That means that Dora's papers have probably long since been stowed away somewhere, after all she has been dead for a quarter of a year. Miss O'Donnell has moved into the study and put her papers on the desk. Among other things was an amendment to Dora's will. That means Miss O'Donnell knows she should be made sole heir."

"And why didn't she say anything about it?" Bob pondered.

"That's the second big question." Jupiter leaned back and began pinching his lower lip.

"Geez, this case is really getting more and more tricky," Bob groaned. "Why would Eloise kill Dora and then not want to live in her villa? Why would Bernadette know about the change in the will but not say a word about it? None of this makes any sense!"

"Yes, Bob, it does," Jupiter was convinced. "We're just missing the crucial key."

A rattling jolted the First Investigator out of his thoughts.

They received a fax. As soon as the first sheet was through, Jupiter picked it up curiously. "This is the police report from Cotta! Maybe we'll get some answers here."

The First Investigator read everything carefully and passed sheet after sheet to his friends. In total, the report was eight pages long and contained the exact dates and times surrounding Dora Mastrantonio's death, results of the medical examinations and transcripts of the interviews with Miss O'Donnell, Mrs Adams, Dr Jennings, Miss Gomez and Mr and Mrs Willow. All in all, however, The Three Investigators found nothing in the police report that they did not already know.

Frustrated, Bob slumped backwards after reading the last sheet and drank the rest of the tea. "It's frustrating. I had thought we'd find a clue in the report... but there was nothing new."

"I wouldn't say that," Jupiter said and pointed to one of the pieces of paper. "I found something very interesting here. Namely, the exact arrival time of the ambulance at the villa. Bob, how far is the nearest hospital from the villa?"

"Excuse me? What does that have to do with our case now?"

"Do you know or not?" Jupiter insisted.

"No, I don't know."

"Pete?"

"I think the nearest hospital is Memorial. That's a short distance north. But what's with the stupid question, Jupe?"

"One hundred points for the Second Investigator. It's the Memorial, as the police report confirmed here. And how long do you think it takes an ambulance to get to the villa from there after an emergency call?"

“Well, I’d guess about ten minutes,” Pete said. “With blue lights, maybe only eight or seven.”

Jupiter nodded. “What do you think, would an ambulance also be able to make it in three minutes in the most favourable traffic conditions?”

The Second Investigator shook his head. “Out of the question. Even a helicopter can’t do that.”

Jupiter smiled with satisfaction. “But according to the police report, that’s exactly what happened—the ambulance arrived at villa at 4:03 pm.”

“So what? So it was called at seven minutes to four,” Pete said.

“No, it isn’t... because Miss Gomez, the cleaning lady, is always on time... always. On the minute. Didn’t she tell you that several times, Pete?”

Pete’s face lit up. “You’re right, Juve! That’s right! She entered the house at four, saw Dora lying at the foot of the stairs, called the ambulance and—”

“—And somehow, it got there faster than is even possible,” Bob finished the thought. “That means that someone else must have called the ambulance earlier.”

Juve continued: “And that means again, that by the time Miss Gomez dialled the emergency number, the ambulance was already on its way. It’s just that no one noticed. Miss Gomez was glad it came so quickly, why should she worry about it?”

Jupiter had sat up straight. He felt he was very close to solving the mystery. “When Dora Mastrantonio fell from the stairs, someone must have been in the house, called the ambulance and then disappeared.”

“Eloise Adams!” cried Pete, reaching for the photo from Mr Willow’s basement. “The photo proves it!”

“Mrs Adams was in the house, yes, but does this mean that she is the killer? That she pushed Dora down the stairs and then stormed off? If so, why would she have called the ambulance? Don’t forget that she had claimed to the police that she was not in Malibu that day. What reason could that have been?”

“There was someone else in the house!” Pete exclaimed.

“Possible, Pete. Although not particularly—”

“Look, Juve!” Pete interrupted. “Here! In the photo! There’s someone else!”

“What are you saying?” Jupiter asked.

Excitedly, Bob and Jupiter bent over the photo. At first glance, they only saw Mrs Adams in the study, shouting at Dora, who was in the hallway. But then Pete tapped on the open door. Behind it stood a shadowy figure, but the photo was too small to make out anything.

But there was no doubt—there had been someone else in the room.

“I don’t believe it!” Bob snapped. “There’s someone hiding behind the door! But only the camera caught that. Mrs Adams couldn’t see it from her position.”

“Unbelievable. Twelve minutes before she died, Dora had a visit not only from Mrs Adams, but also from someone else. Fellas, let’s go!”

Jupiter jumped up and hurried to the back of the trailer.

“What are you up to, Juve?” Pete asked.

“Stupid question, Pete. We’ll go to the lab and enlarge the photo! Then we’ll know who did it!”

In the back third of the trailer was a small crime lab that could be completely darkened and thus also used as a photo lab. It was now Bob’s job to pour the chemicals into flat plastic trays and prepare everything. Since they didn’t have a negative, Bob photographed the photo and made a new print of it, this time as large as possible.

Curious, The Three Investigators bent over the photographic paper while the photo slowly took shape in the developer tub. Then Bob carefully took it out with tongs and dipped it into the stop bath and then into the fixer. Finally, he washed the photo in clean water and hung it on a line to dry.

"Damn! You still can't make out who it is!" Pete stated. "All I can see is a shadow. And a shoe sticking out from behind the door."

"If I had the original negative, the quality would probably be better," Bob said, "but like this—"

"At least you can see the shoe clearly now," Jupiter noted. "That is clearly a woman's shoe—black with a flat heel and a wide metal buckle. Now, if we could find this shoe..."

Pete chuckled. "You mean like Cinderella? Except the person the shoe belongs to isn't a princess, but a murderer."

The First Investigator shook his head. "Not a murderer..."

"Not a murderer?" Pete asked. "Why not?"

"While Bob was enlarging the photo, I thought about everything again."

"You don't say..." Pete remarked.

"And in the process, I realized that it is not so important who was standing behind the door there. Just the fact that someone was standing there is enough of a clue."

"A clue for what?" asked Pete.

"That there was more than one person involved in this whole Dora story. We had always assumed until now that what the spirit voice said was true—that there was a murder... and a murderer. But there are so many details that don't fit into that picture at all!"

"Like what?" asked Bob.

"For example, this photo. Two women are with Dora shortly before she dies. Twelve minutes later, they have both disappeared, but not without calling the ambulance first. There is an heiress who does not want to live in her new villa, but two friends who immediately engaged the moving van. At least one of them knows about a change in the will that sets her up as heiress herself, but she remains silent. And then, of course, there is Dora's ghost, which is extremely cleverly staged, sometimes with a Ouija board, sometimes with a spirit voice on tape. I ask you, fellas, what is all this for? What is this all about?"

Bob and Pete looked at each other, perplexed. "You tell us, Jupe!" Bob insisted.

"Someone is trying to cover something up!" Jupe surmised. "And put the blame for Dora's death on someone else; to divert attention from themselves; and, by the way, to get their hands on a fancy villa... but that person has made a crucial mistake."

"Namely what mistake?" Pete asked.

"She underestimated us," Jupe said. "There was no murder, fellas."

"No murder?" echoed Pete.

"No... but still a crime—which we will solve," Jupe announced. "We'll confront the three ladies, and we'll do it tomorrow. I already have an idea how we're going to do it."

"I can't wait to hear this," said Bob. "How?"

"We let the dead speak."

"I can't believe it," muttered Mathilda Jones as she used a mirror to touch up her garish make-up in the passenger seat of the Rolls-Royce. "I just can't believe I'm getting into this thing again!"

"But you look fantastic, Mrs Jones!" affirmed Pete.

“Oh, give it a rest, Pete Crenshaw!” she growled. “I hope you realize that I’m doing more than I have promised you!”

“Of course, Aunt Mathilda,” Jupiter said quickly, and he tried to suppress the uneasy feeling he had about it. “So, Aunt Mathilda, just do exactly what you did last time. We’ll do the rest.”

“Yes, yes, don’t worry. I just hope you hurry up with what you’re going to do. I won’t stay in my role a second longer than necessary!”

“Admit it, Aunt Mathilda, secretly you even enjoy it!” Jupe quipped.

“Enjoy it? You like to joke, my dear nephew! Last time my knees trembled with fear!”

“But we explained to you that it was all a trick,” Jupe added.

“Yes, otherwise I certainly wouldn’t have said yes a second time.”

Worthington turned into the side street where the Mastrantonio villa was located. It was already dark and the full moon was rising above the roof, painting silver patterns in the cloud fields in the sky.

Familiar candlelight shimmered behind the windows on the ground floor. Jupiter had informed Miss O’Donnell of their visit by telephone. Apparently they had already prepared everything for another séance. It had to be the last one... but the three ladies didn’t know about that yet.

“I prefer to wait in the car this time,” Worthington said after opening the door first to Aunt Mathilda and then to The Three Investigators.

“All right, Worthington,” Jupe agreed.

Bernadette O’Donnell was already waiting for them. “Oh, there you are, Mathilda! I’m so glad you could make it! Thank you very much! With your help, I’m sure we’ll get Dora to name her killer!”

Aunt Mathilda nodded. “Today is the full moon. The connection to the realm of the dead is strong. We will be successful, I am quite sure.”

“Come in, come in!” Miss O’Donnell said.

In the living room, everything was the same—the round table was in the middle of the room. Dr Jennings and Mrs Adams had already taken their seats.

“I’d like to apologize to you, by the way,” Miss O’Donnell addressed The Three Investigators as Aunt Mathilda set up the Ouija board. “What I said two days ago... you know... that one of us could be the killer... that was very rash. The three of us argued a lot afterwards... and you must have got a completely wrong impression of me. Cecilia and Eloise are my best friends! I would never seriously suspect them. I must have been out of sorts that night. Weren’t you, my dears?”

She smiled in Mrs Adams’s direction. She did not return the smile.

“It’s all right,” Jupiter waved it off. “We’ll find out the truth today.”

“Yes, won’t we? We will,” Miss O’Donnell said. “Then the haunting will finally come to an end.”

Pete cleared his throat. “I... uh... need to go to the toilet before we start.”

“Sure,” Miss O’Donnell replied. “You know where it is.”

The Second Investigator left the living room. When he returned a few minutes later, everyone had already taken their seats. Inconspicuously, he gave Jupiter a hand signal. Jupiter nodded back just as inconspicuously.

Then Pete joined them and Aunt Mathilda began her introduction. “I ask you to concentrate!”

She took the glass, breathed into it and placed it upside down on the Ouija board. Immediately, everyone put their fingers on the rim.

Aunt Mathilda let a few moments pass, then she took a deep breath and said: “I ask for contact with the realm of the dead. If the poor soul of a deceased has sought refuge within these walls, please answer us! Spirit, are you there?”

This time it didn’t take long for the glass to move. No one was surprised anymore as it slowly moved towards ‘yes’. Then it slowly slid back to the centre of the board.

Before Aunt Mathilda could continue, Miss O’Donnell asked the next question: “Dora, is that you?”

The glass trembled slightly. Then it started to move. And it went to ‘no’.

A murmur went through the living room. It did not escape the First Investigator that Miss O’Donnell and Dr Jennings were exchanging irritated glances. Mrs Adams, on the other hand, heaved a sigh of relief.

“That... That’s not right!” stuttered Miss O’Donnell.

“Shh!” Aunt Mathilda ruled at them. “You’re interfering with the contact! Spirit, can you tell us your name?”

Letter by letter, the glass slid across the Ouija board. And with each character, Dr Jennings and Bernadette O’Donnell became a little bluer.

G-I-L-B-E-R-T-J-E-N-N-I-N-G-S

18. The Haunting is Over

Cecilia Jennings gave a sharp cry and pulled her hand away from the glass.

“What do you want from us, spirit?” Jupiter asked. The glass continued to move, even without Dr Jennings’s assistance.

G–E–T–T–H–E–T–R–U–T–H

Now Miss O’Donnell pulled her hand away too. “What’s going on here?” she hissed, by now more angry than frightened. “Where is Dora?”

Gilbert’s spirit did not waver.

F–R–O–M–C–E–C–I–L–I–A

“It’s a trick!” cried Miss O’Donnell. “It can only be a trick! Impossible!”

“Would you please stop interfering with the contact from the realm of the dead!” hissed Mathilda.

“Why would it be a trick, Miss O’Donnell?” asked Jupiter brashly. “Do you think the glass could only move if Dr Jennings and you literally had your fingers in it?”

“But Jupe...” said Aunt Mathilda timidly. “The séance... we shouldn’t...”

“It’s all right, Aunt Mathilda. The haunting is over,” Jupiter announced.

“Aunt Mathilda?” Eloise Adams asked in surprise. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That she’s an impostor!” hissed Miss O’Donnell. “Our dear Three Investigators have fooled us! She’s not a medium at all!”

“That’s true,” Jupiter admitted bluntly. “And yet the glass moved. Amazing, isn’t it? How about we drop the masks, Miss O’Donnell? We’ve seen through your game long ago. There’s no need for you to fool us any longer.”

“What game?” Miss O’Donnell asked.

“This one!” Jupiter shouted angrily, pointing to the Ouija board. “Spirit conjuring! Don’t make me laugh! You’ve been moving that glass yourself all this time! You and Dr Jennings! You had agreed beforehand what message was to appear.”

“What nonsense!” retorted Dr Jennings. “Why would we do something so childish?”

“To get the one who was not in the loop to confess—Eloise Adams... To get Mrs Adams to confess to a murder she did not commit—the murder of Dora Mastrantonio.”

Bernadette O’Donnell laughed uproariously. “That is completely absurd! I really don’t have to listen to any more of this. Get out of my house at once!”

“Your house, Miss O’Donnell? You wish! It’s still Mrs Adams’s house. We should ask her if we should leave... or maybe I’d better tell the whole story from the beginning.”

All eyes turned to Eloise Adams. She had turned pale and swallowed audibly before saying in a weak voice: “Keep talking, please, Jupiter!”

“All right... from the beginning.” Jupiter cleared his throat. “Some time ago, Dora Mastrantonio had an affair with Gilbert Jennings. His wife Cecilia didn’t know about it at first, but eventually she found out.”

“How do you know about that?” hissed Dr Jennings.

“There are proof photos,” Jupiter replied coolly. “What exactly was it like then, Dr Jennings? Did he confess it to you, or did you find out on your own?”

For a moment, Cecilia could be seen struggling with herself. But finally she answered in a clenched voice: “He confessed it to me! Just before he died... on his deathbed. I could have killed Dora! She was my best friend and she betrayed me so deceitfully!”

“So you confronted her,” Jupiter surmised, “even if not immediately. It wasn’t until a week after your husband’s death that there was an argument between you—you, Mrs Adams and Dora were here in the house shortly before her death. That’s an event I’m afraid I can’t reconstruct exactly, but I’m sure you can tell us what happened, Mrs Adams, can’t you?”

“I...” Mrs Adams began and broke off.

“Please, Mrs Adams,” Bob said empathetically. “It’s about time the truth came out, don’t you think?”

She nodded. “All right, then. It was right after Gilbert’s funeral. We had all been to the cemetery and Dora dropped a remark about Gilbert that made me wonder. On the way to the chapel, I told Bernadette about it and she revealed that Gilbert was Dora’s lover.”

Dr Jennings immediately turned to Miss O’Donnell. “So she knew from you!”

Miss O’Donnell grinned sheepishly. “Well, I...”

“I had told you in secret!” Dr Jennings snapped at Miss O’Donnell. “I trusted you!”

“Yes, yes, that’s how you are to each other—the best of friends,” Pete said.

“Go on, Mrs Adams!” begged Jupiter.

“When I found out about the affair, I was horrified. So I went to Dora the afternoon after the funeral to confront her because... because she had promised me that she wouldn’t do things like that anymore! She didn’t need men! I was always there for her!”

Tears shone in Mrs Adams’s eyes and it took her a while to continue speaking. “When I arrived, she was on the verge of breaking down. I couldn’t explain it at all. Finally, I told her why I had come and she completely freaked out.”

“That was probably because Dora had already argued with Cecilia about Gilbert immediately before,” Jupiter said. “Because she was in the house too, Mrs Adams.”

Mrs Adams shook her head. “No, she wasn’t! I was alone with Dora!”

Bob took out the enlarged photo and placed it in the middle of the table. “You weren’t.”

Dr Jennings laughed contemptuously. “What is this supposed to be? A piece of detective evidence?”

“That’s right,” Jupiter said. “This photo was taken twelve minutes before Dora died. Mrs Adams is arguing with her right now, and you’re standing behind the door listening, Dr Jennings.”

“That shadow is supposed to be me? Don’t make me laugh!”

“It’s your shoes,” Pete now spoke up. “When I pretended to go to the toilet earlier, I was in yours and Miss O’Donnell’s bedroom to find out which of you is our Cinderella. It’s you, Dr Jennings. Those shoes are in your closet!”

Dr Jennings glared angrily at the Second Investigator. “Who took this photo? An informer of yours?”

“No,” Jupiter said calmly. “It’s your neighbour. He was a secret admirer of Dora and took quite a few photos—among others, the ones that finally put us on the right track. Mr Willow could have solved the mystery much earlier. I suspect that he didn’t tell the police that you two were at the villa on the day Dora died because then, he would have had to admit that he was secretly watching Dora Mastrantonio... and his wife wouldn’t have liked that at all.”

Jupiter paused for a moment and finally picked up the thread again: “So you argued with Dora. What happened then, Mrs Adams?”

"She raged that I shouldn't keep telling her what to do and what not to do. She said I had been getting on her nerves long enough now. She was so mean to me!" Mrs Adams snorted into her handkerchief.

"During our argument, we ran through the whole house. Then we finally got to the stairs... and she... she tripped over a crease in the carpet... and fell. It was an accident! It really was an accident! I didn't push her! I really didn't! I did love her!" Now Mrs Adams fully burst into tears and it took minutes for her to calm down.

"I believe you, Mrs Adams," Jupiter said. "After all, you called the ambulance, didn't you?"

She nodded, sobbing. "She was still breathing, but I didn't know what to do. I thought they would suspect me. Surely those horrible neighbours had heard the argument, I thought, and then they would put me in jail! But I couldn't leave her there without help either. So I dialled the emergency number and ran away."

"And then you came out of your hiding place behind the door, Dr Jennings," Jupiter continued. "You had heard what had happened. Heard, but not seen. Because of the argument, you believed Mrs Adams had actually pushed Dora down the stairs and then left the house in a hurry. But what did you do? You saw Dora lying at the foot of the stairs. She was still breathing. As a doctor, you must have known what to do, but you didn't help her. You left and let your friend die."

Dr Jennings's face had turned sallow and grey. Her mouth had turned into a narrow, bloodless line. She stared at Jupiter from glittering eyes. And then it burst out of her loud and shrill: "She would have died anyway! I didn't kill her! Eloise did! She drove Dora to her death!"

"It was an accident," Jupiter said calmly. "But even if it wasn't, you could still have helped Dora! She was still breathing! You're a doctor! You could have saved her!"

"I couldn't have," Dr Jennings objected firmly. "No one could have saved her."

"So why did you leave instead of waiting for the ambulance?"

"Of course, no one would have believed me!" exclaimed Dr Jennings. "If I had stayed here and turned myself in to the police, the whole story about Gilbert and the fight with Eloise would have come out. And then I might have been blamed for failing to help. But I had absolutely nothing to do with Dora's death!"

"The police will certainly want to investigate that further," Jupiter finished.

Miss O'Donnell had listened stunned to everything. Now she whispered: "Is this whole story really true, Cecilia?"

Dr Jennings's silence was answer enough.

"I don't believe it!" gasped Miss O'Donnell. "And you told me—"

"—That Mrs Adams is a murderer," Jupiter interrupted her. "After Dr Jennings realized that she could be in serious trouble for fleeing the scene of the crime, she was terrified that everything would be revealed. The only thing that could save her permanently was a confession from Mrs Adams. So Dr Jennings hatched a diabolical plan to get Mrs Adams to confess, even though she was actually innocent."

"As a friend for years, she naturally knew that Mrs Adams believed in ghosts and hauntings. So it was natural to use séances and spirit voices to push her into admitting that she was responsible for Dora's death. Only in this way could Dr Jennings be sure that no one would ever connect her with the matter. But she could not put her plan into action alone. She needed an accomplice—you, Miss O'Donnell."

Aunt Mathilda, who had listened to the revelations with fascination until now, now raised her voice for the first time. She turned to Miss O'Donnell: "You snake in the grass! How

much did she pay you to join in?"

"Nothing at all, Aunt Mathilda," Jupiter replied. "She had a much better method. Dr Jennings forged an amendment to the will and held it under Miss O'Donnell's nose."

"She didn't hold it under my nose," objected Bernadette O'Donnell, her eyes not averted from Dr Jennings. "She hid the paper in the desk and made sure I would find it when I went through Dora's papers—which was what happened. I could hardly believe what I was reading and immediately told Cecilia about it. She pretended not to know anything, and finally expressed the suspicion that Eloise might have killed Dora so that the house wouldn't fall to me after her death."

"And you believed her!" said Mrs Adams, stunned.

"No. Not immediately, but I couldn't be sure. So I agreed to Cecilia's plan with the spirit summoning. I thought Eloise would confess if Dora's ghost suddenly spoke."

"Because you also needed a confession for your interests," Jupiter said. "After all, a draft will is not proof, but it would probably have been enough for you to inherit the villa if Mrs Adams had admitted to the murder. The only thing you needed now were witnesses. Witnesses who, on the one hand, were willing to take part in such a session to summon spirits, but who, on the other hand, were one hundred percent trustworthy in the eyes of the police... and in the whole of California there are probably only three people who fulfil these conditions."

"Us," said Bob and Pete as if from the same mouth.

"At the same time, you played the non-believers yourself at the beginning, so as not to make it all too obvious. For your plan, it didn't matter whether Aunt Mathilda was a real medium or not—you moved the glass on the Ouija board yourself anyway.

"However, there was one thing I didn't understand—the suggestion with the Ouija board came from us. What would you have done if we had had another idea to contact Dora's spirit?"

Miss O'Donnell couldn't bring herself to look anyone in the eye as she replied: "We were prepared for a lot. We had a solution for pretty much every method."

"For the spirit voices, among other things," Jupiter said.

"Exactly!" exclaimed Pete. "The tape recording. How did you manage to do that? Where did the ghostly voice come from?"

"I can answer that for you, Pete," Jupiter said.

"My goodness, is there anything you don't know?" Pete remarked.

"I admit the tape thing was tricky," Jupiter explained. "Especially since we had brought our own audio recorder and cassette tape. True that our recorder and speakers were not sophisticated enough for the playback, so Dr Jennings took the opportunity to put in on the big Hi-Fi set and from there we listened to the recording for the first time."

Bob frowned. "That still doesn't explain the voices on the tape, Jupe."

"At the Hi-Fi set, Dr Jennings fiddled with all those knobs and buttons for so long, trying to fool us into thinking that it was about tweaking the sound. What happened was that instead of just playing our tape, she also played another recording containing the fake spirit voice using a remote control hidden somewhere.

"So when we were listening to recording, after every question, she played the spirit voice answers and at the same time overdubs them into our tape. It was no problem matching the answers to the questions because the two ladies had prepared them beforehand. So the spirit voice was on our cassette and we could listen to it again and again at home without raising suspicion, because the sounds we had made ourselves during the recording were also on it.

“A rather ingenious trick, Dr Jennings, I must say... but it did you no good. Because despite all the news from beyond the grave, Mrs Adams has not confessed to the murder, simply because she did not commit murder. It was an accident... but you didn’t know that.”

Jupiter leaned forward, propped his hands on the table and looked Dr Jennings and Miss O’Donnell in the eye. “You two are the only culprits here at the table. And you will have to answer for yourselves—especially Dr Jennings.”

Jupiter remained silent. He had reached the end of his presentation and let his gaze wander over the faces of those present. Pete grinned as contentedly as if he had come up with the solution to the mystery himself. Bob looked anxiously at Mrs Adams, who was staring silently at the centre of the table, trying to process what she had just learned. Miss O’Donnell had guilt written all over her face, and Dr Jennings’s face was so distorted with rage that little veins had burst in her eyeballs.

But Jupiter could only rejoice at the expression on Aunt Mathilda’s face. She looked at him with pride and admiration, as if she were seeing her nephew with completely new eyes. She still had this expression when Jupiter finally got up and went to the phone to call Inspector Cotta.

In the end, everything happened very quickly... and this time there was a confession. When Inspector Cotta arrived at the Mastrantonio villa, Cecilia Jennings and Bernadette O’Donnell admitted everything. The inspector announced the reopening of the case and also promised Jupiter to keep an eye on the shady Mr Willow.

An hour later, Cotta dismissed The Three Investigators to go home—not, however, without telling them that he was expecting them at Rocky Beach Police Department the very next day, where they were to report the whole story.

Now The Three Investigators were sitting in the Rolls-Royce on their way home and Aunt Mathilda was busily wiping the make-up off her face.

“Now I finally know what you three spend your free time doing,” Mathilda Jones said, glancing over her shoulder. “But tell me, Jupe, what made you think that Dr Jennings had forged the will? Was there any proof of that?”

“I’d be interested in that too, though!” said Bob.

“There was no proof,” Jupiter admitted. “But it was the logical conclusion from the information we had. I was so free to take that shot in the dark... and it worked, after all.”

“Logical conclusion,” repeated Aunt Mathilda. “Of course, what else. Well, I must say—fighting crime is really a fascinating hobby! I think I’d like to be there more often in the future when you catch evil-doers. It was so exciting!”

“Well, Aunt Mathilda, I don’t know—”

“Oh, come on, Jupe, I can help you too! You’ll be amazed at what else your old aunt is capable of! This is just the beginning!”

Bob, Pete and Jupiter exchanged uncertain glances. Aunt Mathilda as the fourth investigator? That could be fun!

“You know, Aunt Mathilda...” Jupiter began. “That’s really nice of you, but—”

“Yes, Mrs Jones,” Pete continued. “Really, that’s—”

“Very, very kind of you, but—” Bob added.

“I owe you a favour, don’t forget that. You owe me a favour... and a promise is a promise.”

The Three Investigators were speechless. With wide eyes, they looked into Aunt Mathilda’s happy smiling face. The smile slowly turned into a broad grin.

“Gotcha!” Mathilda Jones burst out laughing, which The Three Investigators and finally even Worthington joined in with relief.

They were still laughing when they passed the Rocky Beach city limit sign.